"The Wisdom to Know the Difference"

November 1st, 2026 The Rev Janet E Frystak

Good morning, it's an honor to speak with you today and my special thanks to the program committee for inviting me back. So how's everyone doing today? Just checking in because like many speakers, I've chosen our topic based on what I most need to think about today. So I'm just curious if any of you are with me. Is anyone experiencing anxiety or unease about anything today? How about this coming Tuesday? Ok, so I'm in good company!

So my question today is how do we live responsibly and peacefully in a world that causes us so much dis-ease? We all know what it feels like to live through times when the ground beneath us shifts in a most undesirable way; the loss of someone we love, a medical diagnosis or uncertain health situation, unforeseen changes in our families, profound relationship difficulties, real anxiety about the future of our democracy, and the gradual realization that the life we imagined for ourselves and for our world is not the life we're actually living. We look for reassurances, we hope for some indication that everything will be alright. But life rarely gives us the certainty we crave.

I believe the Serenity Prayer is made for times like these. This is the first and most famous part of the prayer;

> **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.**

This prayer is probably familiar to most of us, certainly if you've spent any time in AA or any of its adjacent programs. I first read it as a grade schooler, framed on the kitchen wall at my aunt and uncle's house. My aunt had recently given birth to a baby boy who had been severely brain injured during the process from lack of oxygen. He looked completely normal but his prognosis was quite guarded. I was there regularly after school to help with his physical therapy which needed to be done four times a day. As a nine year old I probably didn't even know what the word "serenity" meant, but I sensed that the prayer had something to do with what had happened to my little cousin and that it was very profound.

In researching the prayer's origins I learned that it was not written for AA but rather a decade earlier in the 1930s by a Protestant theologian and pastor, Reinhold Niebuhr, an American of German descent. Niebuhr was living during a period of enormous social and political upheaval; the Great Depression, the rise of fascism in Europe, and the approaching threat of another World War. He was deeply concerned with the problem of human responsibility in a world we can't control. He rejected both naïve optimism – the belief that humanity can fix anything with enough effort - and passive resignation – believing that the fates are sealed and nothing can be changed. He insisted that human beings have genuine moral responsibility but at the same time, very real limitations. His prayer addresses the tension between these two truths and the spiritual challenge of living responsibly in a world where we're not in charge.

So let's consider together what it means to live with the first, and most difficult part of the prayer: ***serenity to accept the things we cannot change.*** Most of us, if we're honest, are not very good at this. We think to ourselves; why is this happening to me, or to my family, or my country, things used to be better, my life should have turned out differently and the list goes on. But what does acceptance really mean? Tara Brach, a psychologist, author and Buddhist meditation teacher speaks to this in her book, Radical Acceptance. For Brach, radical acceptance means meeting reality with *mindfulness* and *compassion. Mindfulness is observing what is happening without denying it or immediately judging it. Compassion is meeting what we see with kindness rather than shame, blame, or self-criticism.* Radical acceptance then, asks us to stop being at war with reality long enough to see it clearly. Only then can we respond with courage, compassion and wisdom. So what might that look like?

Thirty years ago, when I was still a relatively young woman, my beloved father suffered a series of TIAs or mini strokes. He was a practicing physician at the time and seemed to recover after each episode. But each time there would be a new deficit, trouble with word finding, with his memory, with simple tasks like making change.

I accompanied my parents through a series of specialist appointments, a battery of tests and hospitalizations, but no one could come up with a definitive diagnosis as he continued to sharply decline. Within six weeks the decision was made for him to retire, within three months he was admitted to a locked memory care unit. It was one of the most painful and overwhelming experiences of my life.

At some point in his downward trajectory I had my first ever full blown panic attack; shortness of breath, heart palpitations, shaking, dizziness, the whole nine yards. As we were preparing to go to the ER my husband decided to call my dad first. He'd been the family doctor forever and it was hard to let go of that. My dad insisted that we stop by to see him before going to the hospital. He pulled out his medical bag, took my blood pressure and pulse, listened to my heart and reassured me that I would be ok. Having calmed down a bit I looked directly at him and

said, “Dad, it’s not me I’m worried about.” Then, with the wisdom of forty years of caring for people in the worst of circumstances, he said, “Well in that case Honey, you have nothing to be concerned about. Whatever happens to me, everything’s going to be okay!” In that moment, the peace he genuinely felt flowed through me and showed me just what was possible in the face of suffering and loss. As it turned out, those were the last cogent words he ever spoke to me as he died two and a half years later of dementia-related pneumonia. But in that moment he gifted me with the most beautiful example of radical acceptance, one that I always hope to embody when I’m faced with painful circumstances I can’t change.

The second clause of the prayer says ***the courage to change the things we can.***

I think courage is often learned through trial and error. Trying things and succeeding or failing. Courage is not the absence of fear, it’s the willingness to act in the face of it. The courage to leave a harmful relationship, to begin again after a profound disappointment, to let go of loved ones who have let go of us, to ask for help when we’ve always been the one others depended on, to speak up when people are being mistreated, and to remain engaged in a community or a world that often devastates us.

Sometimes that courage is extremely costly and results in losses we can’t anticipate. For example, I’m sure it took guts for Renee Good and Alex Pretti and thousands like them to stand up to the fascist forces of ICE taking over Minneapolis. But it was unthinkable that showing up as a white person to a demonstration in the USA would result in them being killed in cold blood. Yet as horrible as this has been, their deaths along with countless others in detention centers and elsewhere, have galvanized our opposition to the forces of evil roaming our streets and running our country.

Courage begets more courage. And most importantly for those of us concerned about the state of the world, *courage often means refusing to allow our despair to turn into indifference.* We can’t afford to throw up our hands. Instead, we can recognize that meaningful change is often collective. Our individual actions may seem small, but when joined with millions of others, they make a difference. And of course we work for a more equitable world not because we know we’ll get there in our lifetimes, but because the work itself expresses our values and who we are. We’re not responsible for fixing everything. But we are responsible for deciding what we will do with the limited power we have.

This bring us to the final and most challenging clause of the prayer; ***the wisdom to know the difference.***

Angela Davis, a prominent American political activist, academic and former Black Panther once said, “I am no longer accepting the things I cannot change, I’m changing the things I cannot accept!”

So how do we know what is ours to accept and what we must try to change? Sometimes we hold on to things we need to let go of; We try to alter another person's beliefs, try to control the choices of our adult children, wish we could relitigate the past, try to force a resolution to a situation beyond us. At other times, we accept things we should definitely challenge; We remain silent because speaking up might disrupt a relationship, tolerate injustice because confronting it feels threatening, tell ourselves that the powers that be will always win when we actually have more influence than we realize.

I believe true wisdom often requires getting more in touch with our inner world, our wounds, our false assumptions, our automatic responses that might not be helpful. I'm not suggesting that any of this is easy folks. I've faced some challenges in the last several years since retirement that have left me reeling; serious health concerns, severe family stress and rupture, loneliness that has surprised me, and the ever present agony of watching our beloved democracy sink further and further into fascism and authoritarianism. And I know that many of you are facing far more difficult challenges. Think for a moment of a situation in your own life that you might be struggling to accept. What might be one small way you could use your inner wisdom to let go? Maybe it's acknowledging our resistance, noticing when we're emotionally reactive and just slowing down a bit. Or maybe it's more than that.

Over nine centuries ago, Rumi wisely observed that ***this being human is a guest house.*** He acknowledged that the unexpected guests that show up are not always welcome. But he encouraged us to welcome them anyway, ***even if they are a crowd of sorrows that violently sweep your house empty of it furniture.*** He hoped we'd learn to listen and be grateful for whatever their presence has to teach us. Grateful, really? Gratitude even for the things that cause us the most pain? SO much easier said than done folks. But I believe that this is the wisdom at the heart of the serenity prayer.

I also believe that this is essentially a spiritual discipline and our UU congregation can be a place where we practice this wisdom together. Can we offer one another companionship without pretending to have answers, can we cultivate courage without demanding heroism, and can we make room for our grief without abandoning hope? Most importantly, can we agree that this is one of the greatest gifts of our community; that we don't have to face our most difficult times alone?

So I ask again, how do we live responsibly and peacefully in a world that causes us so much dis-ease? Perhaps the answer isn't to look for certainty but rather to learn to live meaningfully without it. We will always come up against things we can't change. We will face moments when courage is required. And we'll most likely make mistakes in deciding which is which. But we can keep practicing, together.

So as we close today perhaps we can rephrase The Serenity Prayer for ourselves:

May we cultivate peace to accept what is beyond our control.

May we discover courage to change what is within our reach.

May we practice wisdom to know the difference.

And may we meet every season of our lives with open hearts, clear vision, and the conviction that, no matter our circumstances, there is always a way to choose compassion, to offer hope, and to contribute to the world we hope to create.

Amen, So Be It.