

The Wisdom to Know the Difference

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Grant me the serenity to accept the things I can not change,

The Courage to change the things that I can

And the wisdom to know the difference.

These words are recited thousands of times every day by thousands of people. Most often this prayer is associated with a 12-step program since it had its origin in one.

These simple words are a challenge to all of us. My thoughts today reflect from personal experience in a 12-step program, and my continuing personal search for my voice and my personal truths.

I believe these words have great significance to our UU denomination and I think we are each challenged by them every day.

That said, please know that this is not a "meeting" and not an account of my experiences in meetings which began with the Serenity Prayer. What I hope to do is to tickle your thoughts about some possible connections to its message and being together in this religious congregation.

To begin, there are a couple of words that I would like to point out which I think will put us all in a framework so that we can be somewhere on the same path for the thoughts I am about to share:

* the prayer is written in the first person-grant me ... to accept... I can not, I can.

* the key words for me are:

serenity, change, and wisdom.

Before he started making chicken soup, Jack Canfield, a leading expert in the development of self-esteem, believes that the two words I AM are the most powerful words one can say. While saying to you, "I AM MARCIA" I am also establishing my identity and my worth. I am not telling you what role I play or what job I do, what talent I have nor am

I claiming association with another person.

It would be my guess that most everyone in this room at one time or another, has been introduced as someone's husband, wife, mother or father. Some of us have even introduced ourselves by our relationship or role.

"Hello, I'm Kevin's mother, Marcia."

"I am only a housewife!"

"I'm Jack's friend, Marcia."

Every time I put someone else's name first or define myself as a role, I fail to acknowledge myself. I give away my personal power making the other person or the role more important. Canfield might explain this behavior as being directly related to my self esteem. Let's save THAT for another day!!

The Serenity Prayer is written in the first person. When one recites the it, he or she is speaking for him- or herself. He or she is asking for serenity, courage, and wisdom.

Sometimes the power of speaking in the first person is felt inside of us like the small child in the conversation with the children who asked his elders, "where does power come from?" Her grandmother gave power to leaves, roots and flowers of the plants that Mother Earth has for us. Aunt Lily tells her that the healing stones and weapon stones and meditation stones bring power. Water was her sister's answer. When she saw the little lamb limping, she felt powerless because she did not have a the plant or stone or water power in her possession. The power that she did have was her compassion for the little animal's discomfort. Because she did not have material things of power, she believed that she possessed no power until her mother told him, "Dear One, you had the power inside you, where all power comes from. You had a loving heart." The mother is the source of wisdom for this child who listened carefully and remembered. What a gift for this child to know that her power came from within her own heart!

Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, it says in Romans 12.

Serenity-that state of peacefulness, the feeling of calmness, -- clarity. Isn't that what people seek? A life of less worry about our loved ones, finances, a job or world peace. Ridding ourselves of the stresses of every day.

Let's try a quick exercise!

- * Sit comfortably.

- * Close your eyes and slowly take 3 deep breaths. On the exhale release any tension you might feel and relax.

- * Find yourself in a favorite place. Feel the sun and the air and take in the smells that are

familiar.

- * Beginning with your feet and working up toward your head, begin to relax your body.

When I ring the chime, slowly bring your presence back into the room and open your eyes.

Does anyone feel different?

When I taught Health, I used this technique with students in 6th and 7th grade to quiet them down, especially in a class after lunch. It was an oft requested activity. The students were surprised that they could relax so easily in a few short minutes. They could not change where they were required to be, but they could change their tension level with this little tool. Sometimes it is as easy as taking a couple of deep breaths and stretching our bodies a bit. And for those who have an office with a door, you can do this exercise in private!

One of the greatest stressors we have in life is change. Dr. Spencer Johnson wrote a little book entitled, *Who Moved My Cheese?* which reveals some profound truths about change. It is a simple parable about 2 little mice and 2 little people who walk in a maze. This maze is where they look for what they want--a job, or the community or family to live in. The cheese is a metaphor for what each wants to have in life - good job, loving relationship, a possession, money, spiritual peace of

mind, health. In the story, the characters are faced with unexpected change. When one of the characters deals with change successfully, he writes what he has learned from the experience on the maze wall. As others see "The Handwriting on the Wall" they learn some techniques to deal with change so that they can enjoy less stress and more success in life. Here are some of the messages:

CHANGE HAPPENS: They keep moving the cheese.

ANTICIPATE CHANGE: Get ready for the cheese to move.

MONITOR CHANGE: Smell the cheese often so you will know when it is getting old.

ADAPT TO CHANGE QUICKLY: The quicker you let go of old cheese, the sooner you can enjoy the new cheese.

CHANGE: Move with the cheese.

ENJOY CHANGE!: Savor the adventure and taste the new cheese!

BE READY TO QUICKLY CHANGE AGAIN AND AGAIN: They keep moving the cheese.

It would be all so easy if we each had a map to the maze. Or, if The Cheese would only stay in one place or not get smelly! The more important our 'cheese' is to us, the less it smells, the more we want to hold onto it because it is comfortable. When the cheese starts to smell we get scared because our comfort zone begins to feel different----it's changing requires us to move beyond our discomfort which is our fear of doing things differently.

As we walk this maze called life, we learn to new move with The Cheeses that come into our lives. Sometimes we feel uneasy or a bit scared because this move brings a different approach or perspective to our walk. We change our direction, and begin to enjoy our new journey with new challenges and triumphs. And our old friend serenity enters our lives again. And then the cheese moves again, and we repeat the feelings associated with a change in direction and learn that we are ok. Our lives are a series of this move, lessons learned, challenges and triumphs. And we go around again,--and again--and again. That is what this journey called life is all about. It is how we read the handwriting on the wall and chalk up the the experiences and deal with the outcomes.

So, where does wisdom enter the picture? Wisdom is knowledge and good judgment and wise conduct based on our experience. Each of us is filled with wisdom because of our experiences. Some of them have been positive and we want to repeat them. Others were lessons that we may not want to face again. Each of us experiences the world differently because of our own personality and the choices we have made and continue to make. Some of us have wondered 'what would have happened if....' Others of us may hear ourselves starting a sentence with 'If only I had....' and have wondered how our lives might be today if we had done something differently in our previous years. There is really no way to know. Trying to figure it out could be only wishful thinking.

When this congregation voted to be a Welcoming Congregation a few years ago, we moved our cheese. Our maze consisted of lots of opportunities for each of us to look at our personal feelings and beliefs to gain knowledge about what it meant to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person, our first UU Principle. We welcome all people regardless of their politics, sexual orientation, race or disability. One of the concerns we had as a congregation in West Redding was the inaccessibility of our building to those who were disabled. Another was to share our liberal theology. We have addressed the previous concern in the plans for our new buildings on Clapboard Ridge. Our public participation in human welfare issues addresses the latter. We are still moving our cheese in spiritual and human rights mazes! And there will be many more opportunities in future days!

Our decision to move to a new worship site and to come back to Danbury after a long absence was not made quickly. The conversation started just about the time I signed the membership book 11 or 12 years ago. There was a great deal of input from the congregation as to needs and wants. There was an expression of desire to be more present as a liberal religious force in the community. We used our mission statement and the UU Principles as guidelines and worked together to make it happen. We listened to each other and were involved in all of the steps and progress being made. We conducted a very successful capital campaign and exceed our initial goal to put our plan into action. This congregation has embraced change not without some trepidation -- in the beginning when we began talking about leaving a beloved space, wondering where to locate, selling the Barn,

finding place to go, how to finance. We took many leaps of faith and, like the cat, have landed on our feet each time. We moved our own cheese, not because it was getting smelly, but because we were comfortable. We took our time and some baby steps to make decisions. We trusted those who came forward to take leadership roles. We listened to each other and used the democratic process to make decisions.

Currently various committees work diligently to make our long and short-term goals materialize. There is a commitment on the parts of many people to make things happen. We continue to be a presence in this community in the soup kitchen. We are an active force with the Association of Religious Communities. Our social action committee brings pertinent information to us and gives us the opportunity to promote justice, equality and compassion in human relations, our second UU Principle.

And we now anticipate being in our own space---soon.

As a congregation we each spoke our truth, we used our collective power to make this new home our reality. Some days we took lots of deep breaths to ease our collective tension and together we breathed sighs of relief with each successful step toward our goal. We moved our cheese and read the messages on the maze walls, always guided by our UU principles. We recognized our changes while they were still small so that we can adapt to bigger changes that are to come.

Today, we are working the Serenity Prayer -- we accept the things we can not change, change or work toward the things we can change, and we use our wisdom and experiences to know the difference we are making and will continue to make in the future.

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