

**Master of my Fate**  
**Rev. Rod Richards**  
**Unitarian Universalist Church of Southeastern Arizona**  
**01/04/09**

(Story for All Ages: *If I Ran the Zoo* by Dr. Seuss)

**Readings**

1. *From Paul's Letter to the Romans (7:15, 19, 21, 25b) in the New Testament, New Revised Standard Version:*

I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate...I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do...I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand...So then with my mind I am a slave to the law of God, but with my flesh I am a slave to the law of sin.

2. "[\*Invictus\*](#)," by William Ernest Henley (1849-1903):

OUT of the night that covers me,  
Black as the Pit from pole to pole,  
I thank whatever gods may be  
For my unconquerable soul.

In the fell clutch of circumstance  
I have not winced nor cried aloud.  
Under the bludgeonings of chance  
My head is bloody, but unbowed.

Beyond this place of wrath and tears  
Looms but the Horror of the shade,  
And yet the menace of the years  
Finds, and shall find, me unafraid.

It matters not how strait the gate,  
How charged with punishments the scroll,  
I am the master of my fate:  
I am the captain of my soul.

**Sermon**

I start each New Year with the spirit of William Ernest Henley. As I optimistically commit myself to positive change, new and healthy routines, helpful tasks and generous acts that will be accomplished daily and creative endeavors that will be engaged over the long haul, I feel that I am the master of my fate; I am the captain of my soul; I *do* run the zoo, and I've got plans!

Around January 15<sup>th</sup>, I feel a little less optimistic, and spend a lot of time saying to myself, "Ok, starting now..." But *things* get in the way. *Circumstances* conspire against me. I may still be the captain of my soul, but we are heading into harsh weather and I cannot promise to stay precisely on course.

By the end of the month, when it is clear that best intentions do not equate to positive outcomes and that I can no longer blame everything on *things* and *circumstances*, I am crying out along with Paul: “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want...” (Which brings to mind a quip from comedian Emo Phillips quoted by Daniel Dennett in [his book](#) on free will: “I’m not a fatalist,” he said, “but even if I were, what could I do about it?”) (pg. 12)

And it raises the question: just how much do we have control over in our lives? Are we masters or slaves? Do we guide our destiny, or are we simply along for the ride? And why do these questions matter to us?

And they *do* seem to matter. There is some reason that untold amounts of time have been spent grappling with the questions of freedom and responsibility within the spheres of religion (where the questions arise within words and phrases like *predestination* and *God’s will*), philosophy and science (where the questions arise in discussions of *determinism* and *inevitability*) and in politics and popular culture (where we find it implicit in such phrases as *Change We Can Believe In* or *30 Days to a New You* or, conversely, *that’s just how I am* or *some things never change*).

And it is fun to explore the mountains of literature on free will and determinism and compatibilism and on and on. Just type in “free will” to Google and peruse the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy entry. Or pick up a copy of “Freedom Evolves” by Daniel Dennett and read as he redefines free will in terms of evolutionary biology. It’s great stuff that I can’t begin to summarize in a sermon...

But why does it matter? Why am I tackling this in a sermon anyway?

Well, it’s a new year, for one thing. It’s a time when these questions are raised within the very practical context of our plans for the future and our reflections on the past. Maybe we wonder what might have happened if we *had* chosen the road not taken. Maybe we question the direction we seem to be headed. Maybe we just wish to view some new scenery and need to alter our course. Can we? Should we? Will we? Or won’t we?

(In an online interview, Daniel Dennett, responding to a question on free will from an evolutionary perspective, asked the questioner to first define what he meant by free will. A little exasperated, the interviewer replied, “Well, you know...I want to know if I am able to alter the future!” “And which future would you like to alter?” Dennett replied.)

Which future would *you* like to alter? We wish to know that we have the ability to *change* from what *apparently* will happen if we don’t alter our behavior, but we have no real way of knowing if this is not the future that was determined all along, banking on the simple fact that we would come to a place of wishing to alter a future that was not going to happen in the first place thanks to our realization about how we wanted to change the future that we expected to happen if we didn’t change. Got that?

I think that our problems with resolutions have less to do with our notions of free will than with our illusions about our spheres of control. We get into a lot of trouble thinking that we should be able to control things that we can’t and abdicating responsibility of those things that we say we can’t control even though we can. It is no wonder that what is known as the Serenity Prayer has gained such popularity:

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.

Separating and clarifying those can be important: things I cannot change and things I can. Many of you know that this prayer is a staple of Alcoholics Anonymous meetings and other recovery groups. We addicts, as out of control as our lives become, have a problem letting go of the illusion that we can control things that are simply beyond our control, which leads to the tortuous logic of addiction. Here's a simple example: You persist in doing things that I don't like, so I have to drink. I use the excuse of being unable to control that which is uncontrollable by me (your behavior) to justify my lack of control over that which is in my control (my drinking).

And though I am talking about addiction in this case, I think that this logic may even filter out to the rest of the world in various formulations. It is raining this morning, so I can't take my walk today. I use the excuse of being unable to control that which is uncontrollable by me (the rain) to justify my lack of control over that which is in my control (my walk). Now I'm not saying that I want to necessarily get drenched on my walk, but there are umbrellas, raincoats...or I could take a walk when it quits raining, which presumably might happen within the same day.

And this is maybe not so serious if it is just one day, but in a fairly short if illogical step it can turn into, "What's the use of walking? It always rains when I'm about to go."

And after all is said and done, I may decide that the reason I'm not walking is because I never wanted to walk in the first place...and that will bring a clarity in regard to my will and motivation that will never be clear as long as I am attributing my actions to something outside my control.

I am a fan of the Serenity Prayer. I love the way that it moves back and forth between what we can change and what we cannot change without clarifying anything about what those might be. We are left with this question that moves, like most truth moves, along with our lives, and we are left asking ourselves which is which. And having this question before us helps to clarify what it is that we truly want.

Personally, and speaking very generally on behalf of the human race, I think that we get into most trouble when we imagine that we can change things that we can't. To be the master of my fate, as we are all indisputably caught in this network of interdependence, I decide that I must also be master of *your* fate. But you, understandably, have other plans. Frustrated by my vain attempts in that direction (changing *you*), I become so disillusioned and apathetic that I don't try to change the things that are within my power to change (changing *me*).

And though the prayer has found a receptive audience in the recovery and self-help movements pointed toward individual spiritual growth, it is interesting to note that its original purpose in the mind of its author, theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, appears to have been much more directed towards political action and social ethics.

Here is the [prayer in its original form](#) as written by Niebuhr:

God grant us the grace to  
Accept with serenity that which we cannot change

The courage to change what should be changed  
And the wisdom to distinguish one from another.

First off, you'll notice the first-person plural...not just "me" but "us." Not just "I" but "we." And though we ask for the grace to accept with serenity that which we cannot change, we also ask for the courage to change *what should be changed*. *Should* implies that we have made a moral judgment about what *is*. In the popular version of the prayer, I ask for courage to change the things I *can*, the implication being that I have already made the judgment that they *should* be changed. Niebuhr, who also wrote a volume entitled "Moral Man and Immoral Society," made the *should* explicit.

And how do we decide what *should* be changed on a societal level. More importantly, how do we convince ourselves that it is something that *can* be changed?

I said earlier that a distinct problem on the personal level for many people is convincing themselves that they can change things that they really have no control over. On a societal level, I think a big problem is that we've convinced ourselves we have no ability to change things that we *can* change. Here, too, the Serenity Prayer asks us to think deeply about what we must accept and what we must work to change.

Elizabeth Sifton, daughter of Reinhold Niebuhr, in a book entitled [\*The Serenity Prayer: Faith and Politics in the Time of Peace and War\*](#), places an important event in the story of the formation of that prayer right here in Arizona; in fact, just down the road in Bisbee, Arizona. Two men who would later become great friends of Niebuhr, Felix Frankfurter and Walter Douglas, played important roles in the tragic strike-breaking and deportation that took place in 1917, standing up to the copper owners and the politicians that supported them.

Felix Frankfurter, who would later become a Supreme Court Justice, was a young law graduate who was sent to Bisbee by President Wilson to sort out the many different claims between the mine owners, managers, and strikers. He calmly presented a report that Phelps Dodge and its president Walter Douglas, local law enforcement and hired thugs were the cause of violence and not the strikers. Will Scarlet, who would later become an Episcopal Bishop, Dean of Trinity Cathedral in Phoenix at the time, was the only prominent Arizona clergyman on the side of labor. James S. Douglas—known to some as "Rawhide Jimmy," son of Dr. James Douglas, the founder of the Copper Queen Mine, purportedly visited the Bishop in Arizona demanding Scarlett's immediate dismissal or the mining bosses would sue the Episcopal church.

Sifton saw these events as formative for the creation of a group consisting of church leaders and prominent labor and social activists that included her father, who supported each other as they fought against oppression and injustice in this country and articulated that struggle in moral and theological terms. The Serenity Prayer was one such articulation, one which managed to survive and inspire countless people since.

I think that it is important for us, at this time, to recapture the oft-neglected history of that prayer, as described by Niebuhr's daughter. Now that circumstances have unalterably changed that economy which we had begun to accept as unchanging; now that we must face the previously unimaginable effects of climate change and diminishing resources; now that the election has opened up possibility that we may have previously thought impossible; wouldn't this be the perfect time to reassess our notions of that which we cannot change and that which we *should* change? What better time to reach out for grace and serenity and courage all at once? What better time to open ourselves to the wisdom that is offered

by this mystery we call life? What better time to question the inevitability of war and oppression and injustice? What better time to ask what changes could occur if we, a network of humans across the globe, in a vibrant participatory democratic way, ran the zoo?

Rather than picturing ourselves as masters of our fate or slaves to a predetermined destiny, what if we imagined ourselves to be fellow workers constructing a new society with greater freedom for every sort of unique individual; changing things with the full recognition that we are dependent upon the Sun and the Earth and interdependent with all of life? What if, rather than seeking to answer all the abstract questions, we kept the questions before us and allowed the answer to flow from our actions?

William E. Henley, the author of *Invictus*, did not lead a charmed life. He was not writing from a triumphant position, declaring himself master of his fate. He had tuberculosis from the age of 12 leading to the amputation of one leg. He suffered health problems throughout his life, as well as other family tragedies and financial difficulties. It seems to me that what he claimed to “master” was not the circumstances of his life, but his responses to them. He continued on despite hardship. He retained hope despite disappointment. As we face the challenges that await us, may we proceed in just such a courageous fashion...and may we find support and encouragement from one another as we make our way.