

READING AND DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR

The Way of Serenity

by

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INTRODUCTION

1. Are you familiar with the Serenity Prayer (p. 2)? If so, what has been your experience with it?
2. The Serenity Prayer is used in Alcoholics Anonymous programs. In the book, Father Jonathan Morris attends an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting where he observes “Christians and non-Christians alike recite from memory words they had made their own” (p. 3). Why do you think the Serenity Prayer is so widely used? What about the prayer do you think speaks to so many people? Why do you think it has been adopted by recovery groups?

PART ONE:
THE SERENITY TO ACCEPT THE THINGS I CANNOT CHANGE

1. Father Morris tells the story of his friend Lorie, who felt overwhelmed by the demanding nature of her job. Have you ever had to deal with a demand you felt you could not satisfy? What was the nature of the demand? How did the situation resolve, and did it shape you in the process?
2. One of the most popular things to wish for is world peace. What do you think Father Morris means when he says, “That wish is naïve because it suggests that peace can be achieved through behavior or policy instead of conversion of heart” (p. 13)? What does it look like to have a “conversion of heart”? How does that bring peace?
3. In Aesop’s fable “The Ant and the Grasshopper,” an ant works hard all summer, storing food for the winter, while a grasshopper plays a fiddle and makes fun of the ant. In the end, the ant has enough food to survive the winter, and the grasshopper does not. Father Morris explains that the grasshopper’s laziness is not serenity. He writes, “The virtue here lies in the middle: setting good goals and going after them with gusto and without living as if everything depends on us or fretting constantly about the future” (p. 23). Have you ever worked hard to accomplish a goal while trusting in God’s help at the same time? If so, what were you able to accomplish?

4. Father Morris writes, “If we are happy when things go well and bad-tempered when they don’t, we will never find true and lasting serenity” (p. 28). Do you think it is possible to stay even-tempered when things go wrong? How do you think this can be achieved? Give an example of a time when you or someone you know behaved calmly in a difficult situation.
5. Dex, Father Morris’s uncle, experienced difficulties in his life—he lost his job and also became very ill. During this time, he wrote a letter to Father Morris, stating, “Planning ahead is good . . . but not too far ahead. It is our daily life together loving each other, loving God, and loving our neighbors that will keep the daily bread fresh and nourishing. Plan too far ahead . . . and the bread gets stale” (p. 37). Planning is often a good thing, but sometimes it can keep us from trusting God to play his part. Have you been able to look to God to give you what you need? If not, why do you think that is?
6. Sometimes material possessions affect our ability to experience serenity. Father Morris explains that sometimes good things can be bad for us if we rely too heavily on them (p. 52). Do you agree with this statement? Can you think of something that is good but that has become so important it affects your ability to live joyfully and peacefully? Give an example.
7. Sometimes looking at things from a different perspective can change how we feel about them (p. 55). Where do you go when you want a change of perspective? Can you think of a time when a change of scenery helped

you make a decision, even if that decision was to accept something you could not change?

8. Father Morris quotes Saint Augustine: “Our pilgrimage on earth cannot be exempt from trial. We progress by means of trial. No one knows himself except through trial, or receives a crown except after victory, or strives except against an enemy or temptations” (p. 62). Have you experienced trials in your life? Think about your experience in light of Augustine’s words. Were you able to grow because of what you went through?
9. One morning, Father Morris is eating a sandwich when a homeless man approaches him and asks him for five dollars to buy breakfast. Father Morris only has a twenty-dollar bill. He gives it to the man and asks him to bring back the receipt. Much to Father Morris’s surprise, the homeless man returns minutes later with the receipt and his change (pp. 75–76). What does this vignette show you about God’s mercy?

PART TWO:

THE COURAGE TO CHANGE THE THINGS I CAN

1. “Change, as we know, is neither good nor bad in itself. . . . ‘Improvement’ is our usual term for positive change, while we call a negative change a ‘decline,’ or a step backward in the state of things” (p. 93). How do you feel about change? Either way, how is Father Morris saying change is an important part of gaining serenity?

2. Father Morris states that God doesn't ask us to be perfect but only to do what we can (p. 95). What is the difference between perfection and doing what you can? Are you satisfied when you do the best you can? Why or why not?
3. Do you agree with Father Morris when he says, "Forgiveness can be awfully hard to bestow, but sometimes . . . hard to accept" (p. 107)? Why or why not? Why might it be harder to accept forgiveness than to grant it?
4. Father Morris tells us that envisioning a better version of ourselves or a better future for our families helps us change the things we can (p. 126). What do you see when you imagine a better version of yourself? Do you think envisioning these things helps us change our circumstances and better align with our visions?
5. "Sometimes the best way to envision ourselves is to imagine how God sees us. . . . He doesn't want to force you into the mold of being somebody else. He wants to bring out the very best of who you are" (pp. 127–28). What do you think are the best parts of your character? How does imagining yourself as God sees you help you see parts of yourself that can be changed for the better?
6. Father Morris quotes John Paul II and his assertions regarding mercy and justice: "Justice alone is not enough. . . . It can even lead to the negation and destruction of itself, if that deeper power, which is love, is not allowed to shape human life in its various dimensions" (p. 132). Do you agree with this statement? Why

is justice “not enough”? Do you think mercy and love are more important than justice?

7. Father Morris tells us that suffering “lived well” can help us mature and gain peace (p. 149). What do you think he means by suggesting suffering can be “lived well”? Have you ever experienced this in your life? If so, share a story.
8. “If we want to change, we need to pick small, concrete areas to work on. We’re not going to change overnight. Think of all the times you have made New Year’s resolutions that led nowhere” (p. 159). What are some smaller resolutions you can make that would help you achieve your larger goals?

PART THREE: THE WISDOM TO KNOW THE DIFFERENCE

1. The third part of the prayer is the most difficult part. What do you think is the difference between wisdom and knowledge (p. 171)?
2. Father Morris visits inmate Judy Clark regularly. She is in prison for murder and has experienced solitary confinement. In solitary confinement, she experiences both interior and exterior silence—a hard way to learn a positive lesson (p. 173). What do you think is the difference between interior and exterior silence? Why do we need both to be able to fully reflect on our lives? How might you practice each type of silence?

3. “Reading forces us to think, to grapple with ideas and concepts, and inevitably to examine our lives and choices. It challenges our minds and souls” (p. 175). How does reading offer opportunities for growth?
4. Father Morris states, “We generally associate prudence with risk-aversion. . . . As we saw throughout the life of Jesus, however, prudence is not only a matter of knowing what not to say or what not to do, but also knowing what to say and do even when feathers will be ruffled, especially our own” (pp. 196–97). Does this surprise you? When in your life have you taken a risk that you knew was the right thing to do?
5. “Taking time to consider the ‘whys’ behind our actions is hugely important in the pursuit of wisdom” (p. 202). What does asking questions and considering the “whys” behind your actions teach you?
6. Viktor Frankl survived imprisonment in a Nazi concentration camp and later wrote about his experiences in his book *Man’s Search for Meaning*. He states, “We watched and witnessed some of our comrades behave like swine while others behaved like saints. Man has both potentialities within himself; which one is actualized depends on decisions but not on conditions” (p. 203). Do you think we have the ability to decide who we will become, regardless of conditions?
7. A poor family approached Father Morris at church and asked him for financial help. Father Morris decided, with a couple of friends, to provide the family with six thousand dollars, only to have the family suddenly dis-

appear afterward. Though he felt betrayed by the outcome, Father Morris had made the wisest choice he could with the information he had (pp. 205–6). Can you think of a time when you made the best decision you could with the information you had, only to see a negative result? What did you learn from it?

8. “Most of the time love requires courage, self-sacrifice, and lots of patience” (p. 223). How has someone in your life shown you this kind of love? How can you show this to the people in your life?
9. Concluding, Father Morris says, “The way of serenity is not a static formula that, once understood, spits out cure-all results” (p. 226). Why are there no formulas when it comes to serenity? Has this book given you some new tools for learning how to find greater peace and happiness? How will you put them into practice?