

“A New Hope: Serenity in a New Year”

Ernie Atkinson  
January 1, 2023

“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.”  
—Reinhold Niebuhr

Happy New Year! How many of you stayed up to watch the ball drop on *Dick Clark's New Years Eve* or spent the evening with friends to celebrate the end of one year and the beginning of another? Or did you just stay home watching TV? I always find this time of year interesting as we mark the change on the calendar. For me, I reset the year on my birthday. It seems more fitting to me personally, and I take the time in November to reflect on the past year and look ahead to the new. Do you follow a similar exercise in your own lives?

As a society, we put a lot of weight on the change from one year to the next. Maybe it's the optimism of new opportunities in the new year, maybe a “New Hope” for things to be better than the last. Maybe you don't want things to change? Why such a focus on the new year?

As long as civilization has been marking out the duration of times and seasons, years and cycles, there have been celebrations to mark the occasions, plans made, and hopes and dreams prepared. As we see in Ecclesiastes, there is a time for everything in its own place. And it seems that the difference between two days, December 31 and January 1, seems like a good place to start. So let's delve in some.

As I mentioned, an exercise I like to undertake each year is to look back and review the past year and the highs and lows. I don't dwell too long, because what has been has been, and I can't change the past. But this reflection can be useful and contribute to an enjoyable new year.

In my work as an Atlantic salmon scientist, I participate annually on a committee of scientists who compile the previous year's work on Atlantic salmon restoration efforts in the United States into a report and database that becomes part of the information used by an international committee for North Atlantic Salmon. Our data, combined with that of Canada and Europe, are used to inform policy at the North Atlantic Salmon Conservation Organization. Each year we meet in March and review the past year. We discuss what went well and what didn't. If something went well, we try to repeat that for the next field season. If something didn't, we discuss what could have been different. We also make plans for the new year and send recommendations back to managers.

I think this is something that people do in their personal lives, whether intentional or not. There is a benefit to doing a sort of annual after-action review and then group the highs and lows into two piles, sustain and change. There is no benefit to holding onto mistakes that were made or clinging to outright successes, because that is all in the past. But there is a benefit in not repeating the same activities that we may not be as pleased about. But in all this we should be able to forgive ourselves and others as we learn and move forward.

The new year often brings reflections on the past and a desire to change, and these take the form of New Year's resolutions. We are familiar with the usual resolutions: lose weight, finish that project, treat people better, walk ten thousand steps each day, *ad infinitum*. A lot of anxiety is created because we put pressure on ourselves and often don't keep these resolutions.

What about the world around us? Another new year's stress is the overwhelming feeling of everything being out of control—massively. There is turmoil in our country. We have one group calling the other group names or accusing them of not being faithful to the nation or the party or the religion. The pandemic won't quit, and energy costs keep increasing. And in the twenty-first century, there's a war in Europe that doesn't make any sense, especially in the modern global economy. It seems a lot of stress and anxiety occurs because of our frustration at not being able to change things or perceive the ability to change things. Maybe that's why we make resolutions in the first place—we're trying to exert some type of control on our lives. So it can be good to center ourselves.

Reinhold Niebuhr is famous for what we call the Serenity Prayer: "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." According to *Encyclopedia Britannica* (<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Reinhold-Niebuhr>), Niebuhr was an American theologian from the early twentieth century who was credited with trying to revive the theology of the Reformation, with an emphasis on sin and grace through his philosophy of "Christian Realism." He is also credited with what is known as the Serenity Prayer.

I bring this up now because at this time, when the world marks the end of one cycle and the beginning of another, I think it's worth reflecting on what we can do, what we can't do, and being at peace with the difference. In other words, "Don't sweat the small stuff, and it's all small stuff." I don't know who said that, and this advice seems so simple for us to follow, but dang it, that can be hard! I have bills to pay, food to prepare, and the TV tells me I'm fat or need this or that to be a better person. What about climate change, my neighbor's barking dog, or the fact that no one seems to wear watches anymore? It's all too much!

Breathe... "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.” It can’t be that easy to simply let go, can it? No, it isn’t, but there is always hope.

We just celebrated the birth of Jesus, a proclamation of a “New Hope” for humans and a reminder that God still cares. All through the Old and New Testaments, there are recurring tales of God asking followers to trust that they will be cared for. The Israelites in the wilderness, the Israelites in captivity, Jesus’s repeated parables reminding his followers to trust in God—all these stories involved people of deep faith who still couldn’t comprehend that they would be cared for. Maybe not in the day-to-day cooking, cleaning, going to work kinds of ways, but in the bigger picture of being in the right place at the right time and providing both the challenge and ease we all need to get by.

We need to take what’s offered, but knowing what that is can be hard, especially with all the confusion created by all the other concerns in the world like climate change, my neighbor’s barking dog, or the fact that no one seems to wear watches anymore!

Last week, I mentioned to Sarina I was going to use the “Serenity Prayer” in this message, and she told me she had a distilled version that goes like this: “I can’t. God can. I think I will let God”.

As you look forward to the upcoming year, I hope you will find peace and serenity as you go through your day-to-day functions. There is so much we can’t control, but there are some things we can. We can be living examples of people of faith. We can give 100 percent in the areas where we have gifts and talents, and we can trust that the fuzzy stuff on either side of us will be taken care of by others through our Creator. I hope we can learn how to tell the difference because, “I can’t. God can. I think I will let God.” Amen.