

The Serenity Prayer

by LaBreeska Hemphill

“God, grant me the **Serenity** to accept the things I cannot change, **courage** to change the things I can, and the **wisdom** to know the difference.”

Most of us have come across this powerful little prayer at one time or another. It has been displayed on plaques in restaurants, homes, and places of business. It can also be found in friendship cards, etc. However, where this prayer has been most effective is with *Alcoholics Anonymous*. They adopted it in 1941. Wherever we find this priceless little gem of wisdom it will have “anonymous” written at the bottom. Having said that let me tell you about a fascinating lady evangelist that I once knew.

Imon Ursery was one of the most gifted and interesting women that I have had the privilege to be acquainted with. Her ministry spanned several decades, reaching far into the sixties. She was dynamite in a small package. Sister Ursery, as everyone called her, was a petite lady minister and poet with an abundance of strikingly beautiful, auburn hair. She spoke with a soft voice, as she preached up and down the aisles. You had to lean-in in order to hear her but her sermons were delivered with great energy and passion. When she broached a subject it was evident that she had done her homework. She knew what she was talking about and was going to tell you something that you didn't know. One of her unforgettable sermons was on dogs. She loved dogs and had studied many mixes and breeds, and found them to have similar characteristics to human beings with recognizable personality traits. All that was news to us back then and we loved it. She was fascinating as she shared her vast knowledge with us and quoted pages of her lovely prose and poetry by memory. She kept us spell bound with the many subjects she spoke on.

At one point Sister Ursery had gone to live with a shepherd and his family in California who had huge sheep herds. She slept in tents for weeks, ate their food and learned everything she could about the sheep and the shepherd. The things that learned were phenomenal and she passed it along to her audiences. One thing that we found amusing was what she told about the young sheep. In order to get them in the pen in the evenings they would jump a bar. The shepherd knew how high to set the bars for each age group. The young sheep needed a challenge and he had to set the bar high for them. If it was too low they would just stand there and wouldn't come into the pen. She brought the message home when she likened them to teenagers and their need for a challenge. She also told about the sheep that got injured, how the shepherd would bind them up and keep them close to him. No matter how way-faring or self-willed the sheep had been before his accident, after being close to the shepherd as he healed, he never wandered away again. She likened all these things to the Good Shepherd and his fold.

When Sister Ursery started coming to Joel's dad's church it was in the early 50's, he was just a boy, but she was already a veteran of the ministry and had preached in some of the largest full

gospel churches in the country. Joel recalls with embarrassment a time when Sister Ursery came to their house on the way to another engagement. Mom and Dad Hemphill were expecting her and had made provisions for her to spend the night with them. However she was running later than they had anticipated so everyone was asleep when she arrived. It was a sultry Louisiana night and Joel, along with several of the kids had taken their pillows and blankets and made pallets on the living room floor in front of the big fan. Their door was never locked, so when Sister Ursery walked in after midnight and found pallets strewn on the floor she assumed that they had a house full of company. She shook Joel and he sat up and talked to her. She asked if they had company and he said "yes." Then she asked him if they had room for her and he said "no."

The poor thing drove back to town and rented a motel room for the remainder of the night. When Joel came home from school the next day, she was there. His parents were puzzled. They asked him, "son why would you tell Sister Ursery such a thing?" But he was just as puzzled as they were. He didn't remember anything about it. He'd been talking in his sleep!

The many times we heard Sister Ursery speak she never revealed much about her private life but it was evident that she'd had her share of heartache. There must have been broken relationships, and her desire to bear children was never fulfilled. She had painful memories like most all of us. But, she took her pain and brokenness and learned from it, then passed her knowledge to others.

When Imon Ursery told us over half a century ago that she was the author of the *Serenity Prayer* we had no reason to doubt it. She was certainly capable. She had that kind of insight. Her own experiences had taught her that there are things past, present, and future that we are *powerless* to change. God help **us** to accept this! She found that there were things that she could change by living for God and preaching the word with all of her might. But somewhere along the way she realized she would have to lay it all to rest, put her questions aside and quit struggling with things that were too big for her.

What a lesson for us today. Let us fix the things that are fixable, and pray for wisdom and guidance to know what we can change and what we are powerless over. It is good to know that the Father doesn't want His children struggling over things that are completely out of our control. We can't change *others* but we *can change ourselves*. He expects us to do all that we can then leave the rest up to Him.

Though authorship of the *Serenity Prayer*, from time to time, has been claimed by others, it is noteworthy that none of them ever offered proof. Some fifty years ago Sister Ursery confided in us that one insurance company wrote her a \$5,000.00 royalty check to use the prayer as their motto. She never seemed to mind that the world didn't recognize her for the poet that she was. You see, the real pay-off is the fact that her words have lived on long after her passing and continue to comfort and lighten the load of everyone who reads them.