

Serenity and the politics of stupidity

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I imagine many Americans felt some anxiety watching the debacle unfold over the Affordable Care Act. From the [government shutdown](#) to problems with healthcare.gov, the American promise didn't look so hot.

In conversations with my friends and colleagues, with my students and family and (to the concern of my daughter) with the radio, I stumbled to find some solace amidst the storm of stupidity that seemed to defy politics and logic. And when I stumble I usually look to Reinhold Niebuhr. In our recent times of war, [Niebuhr's *The Irony of American History*](#) (1952) struck me as a necessary antidote to hubris and unjustified violence. In our recent time of stupidity, I found Niebuhr's prayer for humility—also known as the [Serenity Prayer](#)—quite helpful: “God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference.”

This simple prayer has been made popular through its adoption by 12-step programs, especially Alcoholics Anonymous. But Niebuhr originally wrote it to reflect upon the Great Depression and the Second World War. While there has been [some contention](#) over the origins of the prayer, it seems fairly clear now that Niebuhr is its author.

Niebuhr's daughter Elisabeth Sifton writes about his sentiments in her book [The Serenity Prayer: Faith and Politics in a Time of War and Peace](#). “It reminds us of the virtues we must call upon in our private lives,” she observes, “and it also concerns the qualities needed to act in the intricate social networks that connect us to each other.” Thankfully, we are not stricken with the cataclysms of Niebuhr's time, but surely this prayer offers perspective on both the inability of our national leaders to act like leaders and the capacity of the country—meaning the rest of us—to continue despite such an impasse.

The image of Niebuhr being calm and resolute in the face of tragedy is popular but somewhat simplistic. Recently, I've found new meaning in Niebuhr's relationship to the spirit of that prayer as I've learned to see that relationship with some irony—a notion Niebuhr would surely appreciate.

In [*After Cloven Tongues of Fire: Protestant Liberalism in Modern American History*](#), David Hollinger seeks to reorient the discussion of the decline of mainline Protestantism. "In the long run," Hollinger contends, Protestant liberals

did lose the institutional control of Protestantism they once had, but in return they furthered the causes in the national arena to which they were the most deeply committed.

A central actor in this transition was Niebuhr, a character routinely referred to as a giant of mid-century Protestant theology and liberal politics. Hollinger argues that these roles combined to create a surprising result:

Niebuhr's Christian realism enhanced the ability of his followers to understand the affairs of the world, and to participate fully in them, but it diminished the capacity of his successors to deploy a distinctly religious justification for progressive political action.

The irony of Niebuhr's power was that as he moved deeper into an America becoming less Protestant and more secular, his sectarian impulses grew ineffective. Simply put, he was no longer needed as a towering Protestant theologian. In a sense, his work was done.

My hope is that we are witnessing a similar moment. We often hear that the sectarian strife that defines Washington politics today is nothing new. I don't take solace in that explanation. What I do consider helpful, though, is to imagine that America has changed around and underneath such sectarian strife in ways so substantial that wisdom will prevail: the wisdom to tell the difference between that which we can change and that which we cannot.

In lieu of that, I hope that the same forces that rendered a figure like Niebuhr relatively irrelevant will work as well on characters far less capable.

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