



M. Scott Peck, MD's book titled: "The Road Less Traveled: A New Psychology of Love, Traditional Values, and Spiritual Growth(1978), is for me the mother of all self-help books. What I found so compelling about this book which I could not adequately explain earlier in my life was how it debunked illusions about life we victimize ourselves with and chase in futility. This is a sure fire recipe for unhappiness. For those of you who are "anti" religion and maintain a clear divide between spirituality and faith in the existence of a deity that you do not cross, the mention of a Christian psychiatrist, author, philosopher like Peck might have you tune me out the way right wing Republicans tune out Bill Maher. Call me a fool if you will however, I will try to make my point without alienating warring camps. That is, secularize Peck's gift on how to achieve happiness. For the purposes of this article I will define faith as a fervent belief in the existence of unknowable, uncontrollable, and infinitely expansive, adaptive, and regenerative forces in the universe working within and between us to adapt to life's misfortunes without misery swallowing up our capacities to make the best of painfully unjust, cruel, and sometimes tragic circumstances.

My indebtedness to Dr. Peck originated surprisingly not with his book which I gratefully acknowledge as ground breaking. It arose out of the meat of a 1991 Playboy magazine interview he gave. Dr. Peck was quoted as follows: "I believe, along with many other people, that perhaps the greatest event of the 20th Century occurred in 1935 in Akron, Ohio, when A.A. was established. A.A. was the beginning of the self-help movement, and also the beginning of the integration of science and religion on a grass-roots level(<http://www.historyaccess.com/billwilson-hista.html>).

Scott Peck boldly proclaimed Alcoholics Anonymous to singularly have advanced human evolution more than any other movement of The 20th Century. When I first thought about this remark I chuckled thinking the editors of Webster's Dictionary might use this quote to illustrate the concept of hyperbole. This remark was so provocative that it was hard for me to let go. One could certainly make the case that addictions erode our capacities for loving concern for ourselves and others as we lose control over

how we chose to respond to stimuli and start behaving like lower forms of life. In doing so we become helplessly intolerant of the human condition and act out story lines that denigrate and atrophy our capacities to learn to make the most of one moment to the next. We destroy our potential to find peace, joy, pride and serenity. We lose our capacities to make lemonade from lemons. At the heart of the antidote for this assassin of transcendence is a couple of lines that for seekers of wisdom on how to live life well was for me like being struck at point blank range by Cupid's arrow of "loving enlightenment."

"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."

The lines above are known to millions as "The Serenity Prayer." It is the common name for an originally untitled prayer authored by the American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr<sup>[1][2]</sup> (1892–1971). It was adopted by Alcoholics Anonymous and other twelve-step programs([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Serenity\\_Prayer](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Serenity_Prayer))

I recite this prayer daily and after years of reminding myself to make it my model for living well it still takes my breath away like some artistic masterpiece. I get caught up in reverence of its divine wisdom and fall in love with its gifts over and over again. It's a perfect prescription for happiness whose execution is guaranteed to spawn feelings of frustration and disappointment as it invites us to solve the unsolvable mysteries of the universe and challenges us to come to terms with the limits of our reach, knowledge, and control over our unfathomable selves and this greater universe. What I love about these lines is their timeless prescience and clarity of thought that makes these ideas accessible no matter the divides in education, wealth, social class, or intellect. I feel about this prayer the way I feel about the marriage of the lyrics and musical threads to some Beatles songs or some quotes made by Mark Twain and Albert Einstein. Even for those of us with grown up allergen laden digestive issues it goes down as smoothly as some pureed lactate free, gluten free, antibiotic free, and growth hormone free foods. It is the evolutionary ideal toward which billions of us aspire, what most psychotherapists wish for themselves and their patients, and what parents wish for their children. Can anyone argue that we are all served well to trust and value ourselves to gain wisdom from the past, to be open to processing and learning from what is new to discover in the present moment, and have courage and faith to move forward in spite of the unknowns and uncertainties regarding our continued existence and possession of our faculties?

Can one be mindful of one's self and give up hope to transcend the inevitable loss of everything we cherish in this universe on our predestined march towards death without making pain the acid of our misery? To embrace the concept of free will is to affirm that one has the choice to suffer our pains or not suffer our pains.

I never met Viktor Frankl, an Austrian neurologist, psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor although I count him as one of my heroes. His search for meaning while in a German concentration camp helped him illuminate and draw strength in looking for what was inherently good about human beings. Finding crumbs of human decency in an incarnate hell kept his spirit alive and invigorated his faith in surviving his visit to evil's lair.

I did however know the love of a now deceased family member who was my family's version of the transcendent Viktor Frankl. Naomi Crell-Davison, was my mother's lone sister. My Aunt was the happiest member of my extended family for several generations not counting myself who did not become reasonably competent executing The Serenity Prayer until decades after her death. Naomi endured the auto-immune disorder known as Rheumatoid Arthritis. It was an extremely debilitating and progressively degenerative disease. The short of it is the immune system is fooled to wage war on our systems of regulation, growth and repair. My Aunt's immune system literally cannibalized her own joints like the digits of her fingers. On a scale of 1-10 Naomi's pain was in the range from 6-10 depending on the day. If I were to personify her illness, Josef Mengele the Nazi doctor who performed cruel and sadistic experiments on concentration camp victims comes to mind. What was most remarkable about this woman I am honored and proud to have counted as family was that she lived a dignified life from her wheelchair organized by some simple rules. Naomi did her best every day to pull herself out of bed and engage in meaningful activities. These meaningful activities believe it or not included cleaning, cooking, working via telephone for an attorney, and doting on her two nephews. She refrained from dwelling on, feeling sorry for, fantasizing about what could have been or worrying about what will be. She started each day afresh without attaching herself to expectations of what she could accomplish. If she could not do something herself after committing herself to the goal, she asked for help. I have never met anyone in my life that people were more willing to assist. If she could pick up the phone with her arthritic fingers and articulate her words as sometimes painful spasms left her shaking with fatigue, she did what she loved to do, engage loved ones in conversations about their lives.

We never spoke about religion or spirituality during our many kitchen conversations in her apartment. My best guess is that if my Aunt believed in some Deity she believed her path to communion with her Creator and finding justice in the human condition of painful loss was by turning her tragedy into an opportunity to experience herself made in "His or "Her" transcendent image. She was the most successful person I have ever met in that regard, and the happiest from moment to moment no matter her limitations. I hope you find a measure of hope, inspiration and faith for yourself in this article and in particular, my Aunt's story. Twenty five years after her death she remains an unforgettable figure to anyone who ever opened their heart and mind to her.