

# Security, Serenity, Peace of Mind

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A Sermon preached for the UU church of Colorado Springs

By Christine Robinson      March 20, 2022

What a time our culture and world is having right now. Will the pandemic roar back? Will the Ukrainians keep their nation? Will there be more forest fires this summer and could it be that our planet will just melt down? How do we live with all this suffering in the world? How do we live with all this uncertainty? It would be all too easy to live with negative emotions all roiled up, all the time. We could do that all on our own, but of course, all our media feeds and clickbait monetize keeping us swimming in oceans of anger, anxiety, and fear.

We long, instead, to experience security, serenity, and peace of mind, and yet...it doesn't seem RIGHT, somehow, with the world the mess that it is in.

To parse this conundrum, I have taken the liberty of making narrow definitions of three words that are often used interchangeably. This is a tough experiment, unsupported by any dictionary but helpful, I think, in figuring out what is realistic in this world.

- For this morning, I'm defining security as the practice of securing ourselves from bad things happening to us. Security is important to us but...impossible to attain.
- I'm going to define serenity as feeling bathed in good feelings and lack of urgency, no matter what is going on. I say that being bathed in good feelings and lack of urgency is a decidedly mixed blessing and should only be attempted in moderation.
- I'm going to define peace of mind as the path that wanders realistically between good feelings, appropriate actions, an ability to control anxiety, and putting prudent energy into safety and security.

You want to call what I'm calling peace of mind, serenity? No problem. plenty of dictionaries will agree with you. But we can't think properly with all these mushy words, and we need to think about this!

So, let's think about these things one by one.

## ***Security***

Security is that feeling of being safe and in control. It's a nice feeling, but it exists on a continuum and never is an absolute. You can feel a little bit safe and in control or very safe and in control, but if you feel absolutely safe and in control you are in the land of "de-Nile"

We mostly do know this in some rational part of our brain, and there is no point in agonizing about it, so we don't. But if we stuff this absolutely true statement too far down in our thinking, we will miss the zest that is added to life when we remember that this astounding gift will someday expire.

Everybody needs at least some security. Most of us seek safety and control...we began as infants when our cry brought someone to feed or warm or change us, and continued through a childhood of security blankets, parental manipulation and putting energy into doing and learning the things that, we were told, we would need to know to have some control over our lives. The drive to security is inborn and powerful, especially if there was not enough of it in our lives. Some of us have to deal severely with ourselves to take even the most sensible risks

There are degrees of security, and some degree of security is appropriate and necessary, and always must be balanced with cost. It is sensible to lock up one's house when one leaves it. But if one is not willing to even open a window to let the fresh air in, as one's neighbors do, the need for security has started to make life miserable. Parents want to keep their children safe. But if they are so nervous about the safety of their children that they will not let them walk to school with the other children or ever be out of their sight in a public place, how will the children grow up and develop independence?

The second cost of the quest for security is that we will begin to assume that since we have done all prudent things, the bad things won't happen. And when they do? Then we have not only to deal with the aftermath of the fire, or the firing, or the illness or the divorce, but we will feel angry at ourselves for not being good enough to prevent this, or at others for disturbing the security we thought we had earned. We suffer twice the agony of being out of control; the natural consequences, whatever they were, and the agony of beating ourselves up for not avoiding this misfortune. For all the truth there may be in our recriminations, the larger truth is simply that fires happen, people get sick, relationships break up, and security is an illusion. When we know that, we suffer less.

A third cost of the all-out quest for security is that it limits our compassion. If we tell ourselves that we are in control of our life and because of our goodness and diligence will never get sick or lose our jobs, it will be hard for us to be compassionate to someone who has. In order to keep our worldview, we will have to find a way to blame the victims for their misfortune. We find ourselves asking questions that sound suspiciously to our friends like, "what did you do to deserve this?" and saying things about the unfortunates in society that sound like, "you made this bed, now lie in it." But the control that those attitudes presuppose is an illusion, and sooner or later, most people will discover for themselves, the need for compassion.

Security, at best, comes on a sliding scale that never hits the jackpot. The quest for inappropriate amounts of security in our lives damage us, and damages others. We live best if we learn to live with the knowledge that we are not in control.

### ***Serenity***

To be calm, unruffled, unconflicted, peaceful....it does sound wonderful. Countless books have been written, lectures lectured, and sermons preached on how to attain this illusive state. Unitarian minister of the 1950's, A. Powell Davis writes of receiving an flyer; this was so long ago that he called it a "multigraph" promising serenity...

...for one dollar a year. It seemed like a bargain. In case I did not have a dollar, the agency would promptly send me a little cardboard bank in which I could save a dollar up a dime at a time. Perhaps it was the thoughtfulness of this arrangement that predisposed me to read the entire communication. At any rate, I read it. And this is what I found: that I can know exactly what to do in every situation, and how to do it perfectly, for God in the midst of me will be my intelligence. That is to say, He will If I send this institution a dollar a year.

Davis goes on to say that he cites this example to show that our quest for serenity is often made in the face of ridiculous presumptions. Like that serenity is always a good thing, for instance, and that it's attainment should be easy. Both of these are incorrect. Serenity, that utter peacefulness of the undisturbable, unconflicted soul is, according to Davis, not a good thing at all. He equates serenity with quietism, with the unwillingness to be distressed. He does not believe that quietism is compatible with a human life. Conflict, after all, is how we learn and grow and improve the world. If we are unwilling to feel badly about what is going on around us we will not be able to do anything about it.

No one was a better example of this than the Rev. A. Powell Davis himself, who was an enormously powerful preacher of the All Souls Unitarian Church in Washington DC in the middle of the last century. A. Powell Davis' sermons were so highly thought of that they were excerpted in the Washington Post every Monday morning for several years. A. Powell Davis had it made. He could rest on his laurels and cultivate peacefulness and serenity, but what did he instead, do? He was so disturbed by Senator Joseph McCarthy's shenanigans, so convinced that they could destroy the nation, that he took the Senator on. He was one of the first to do so, suffered the consequences of being labeled a communist for his pains and went on fighting. No serenity here. But his courage paved the way for others to begin to fight back against his demagoguery. McCarthy was defeated, in the end, and A. Powell Davis died at the age of 55. There is no security in life. Goodness or worth does not guarantee anything. And as for serenity, well, let us just say that, attractive as it sometimes is, it is not the only value in life and should not be our sole goal.

That leaves us with peace of mind. Now, once again, this isn't in any dictionary, but to me, "peace of mind" has an ethical dimension that is missing in mere "serenity". "Peace of mind" is more than a blissful feeling. It is a life stance that you get by living well the life that is before you to live. Peace of mind implies that one is happy with one's choices, has engaged the world and done one's bit and has found contentment within that work and those choices. Peace of mind doesn't come from sending one's dimes to quacks, from finding the perfect form of meditation, or from avoiding the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. Peace of mind, to my mind, comes from living a real life and making peace with its conflicts.

### ***Peace of Mind***

Peace of Mind, then, unlike security and serenity, I take as an unmitigated good. It is not easy to attain, but worth the effort. Like Security, it exists on a slider that never gets to max. We attain it by living well. Here are some of the things that means.

- It means living, by and large an ethical life...one in which we feel good about the choices we have made and the values we have lived by.
- It means living a connected life. It means having friends, family, or both, with whom we are in a reciprocal relationship: I help you, you help me. It means being trusting and trustable.
- It means living a prudent life: appropriately aware of safety and security, neither careless nor anxious. The exact point in which that balance has been reached is different for everyone, but balance there needs to be.
- It means focusing on living the present and find happiness and satisfaction in the present. Of course, brief trips down memory lane are one of the spices of life...note the popularity of the Facebook feature which gifts you a picture or post from this day in your Facebook history. 7 years ago today, I was enjoying the Northern Lights in Alaska. Great memory. But today's sky is beautiful, too. Nor does a lifestyle that postpones all happiness until some later date make for peace of mind. Looking ahead is good, in moderation.
- It means living realistically. Peace of mind is not assisted by denial, running from problems or refusing to face reality. Those are desperate strategies of those who don't enjoy peace of mind. Peace of mind is also not found by beating one's head against the brick walls of reality. Remember that prayer...useful to everyone, whatever their theology, "grant me the serenity to accept what I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the courage to know the difference."

Finally, I would say that peace of mind is attained by practices...what some would call spiritual practices, but they can be very “of this world”. My father had a friend who took on woodworking projects that mostly involved patient hand-sanding. It was, he said, ‘how he relaxed and had some time for himself.’ Many a walker in our world is walking not only to balance calories in and calories out, but to balance their emotional world. Prayer is not always asking for stuff; for many, it is a seeking of peace of mind. Meditation is not always peaceful, but it’s fruit is a balanced, present life. I hope you have some kind of a peace of mind practice, and that you...well, practice it. Given that absolute security is an illusion almost all of us will experience times of great anxiety, and suffering...times when we will need coping mechanisms developed in better days. As a labor and delivery nurse once said to me, “I can teach Lamaze methods to a woman in labor. But really, it works best if she’s had a little practice beforehand.

We need a practice to fall back on. Here is a quick one for you, based on the hymn we sang earlier. “Breathing in peace, Breathing out love.” Just say it to yourself as you breathe in and breathe out. Nothing more.

Peace of mind is a lifetime prescription, never attained but worth the pursuit. To be trusting and trustworthy, realistic and dependable, connected to others, able to live happily in the present, and willing to do the right thing are conditions that will enhance our lives as we pursue our quest for peace of mind. So, unlike the futile quest for security or the questionable quest for serenity, I can recommend to you wholeheartedly, that you pursue peace of mind. You'll be better for it; so will we all.

This morning, we are going to talk about peace of mind, a topic which has been on the minds of humanity for a very long time! To introduce the topic, I want to share a reading from Sr. Wendy Becket, who was a popular art educator of the 1990’s. This comes from her book on Peace. Here is the painting she is talking about. It is Gilles by Jean-Antoine Watteau (pronunciation note: Jill-es) painted in 1791. [Here is the picture](#); I’ll give you a moment to look at it.

Sr. Wendy writes:

Gilles is a man discomforted: he stands exposed, tense and unhappy. Yet we could not call him a man who is not at peace. Something has happened (Watteau does not spell it out) that has removed him from his fellow actors and left him painfully alone. Gilles is ill at ease, but he has no option: what is happening must be lived through, and he sets himself to do it. This courage – this acceptance of powerlessness and decision to await consequences from which we cannot escape – this is an element of the confidence that springs from peace. Gilles is at peace because he does not rage against the inevitable. The wisdom is in knowing what is inevitable and what, with courage and intelligence, can be changed. Fundamentally, though, nothing matters except to be true to what we know is right.



Gilles by Jean-Antoine Watteau 1791

We will continue with a meditation that is a UU contribution to peace of mind: a sung meditation on breathing. For the meditation, don't try to sing, just listen and see if you can breathe in rhythm with the music...about four beats to each in breath or out breath.

(video)

Now I want to say one more thing about security, and that is what makes churches feel secure. Lots of things, of course, not all of which are always present. Steady staff and ministry is very comforting...you don't have that right now. Insurance...you do have that! A building, you have that and we'll soon be back to it and....a successful pledge drive, to give leaders of the congregation a clear idea of how much income the church can expect for the year.