

Desiderata

by Max Ehrmann

Ehrmann was an American writer of German descent who was born and raised in Indiana. A lawyer by trade, Ehrmann was a graduate of both DePauw and Harvard Universities. It has been reported that the inspiration for the poem *Desiderata* occurred one day when Ehrmann wrote in his diary that, “I should like, if I could, to leave a humble gift -- a bit of chaste prose that had caught up some noble moods.” At the age of 41, Ehrmann switched careers to become a professional writer and poet. Ehrmann died in 1945 and like many artists, *Desiderata* did not achieve fame until well after his death.

The common myth is that the *Desiderata* poem was found in a Baltimore church in 1692 and is centuries old, of unknown origin. *Desiderata* was in fact written around 1920 (although some say as early as 1906), and certainly copyrighted in 1927, by Ehrmann. The *Desiderata* myth began after Reverend Frederick Kates reproduced the *Desiderata* poem in a collection of inspirational works for his congregation in 1959 on church notepaper, headed: "The Old St Paul's Church, Baltimore, AD 1692" (the year the church was founded). Copies of the *Desiderata* page were circulated among friends, and the myth grew, accelerated particularly when a copy of the erroneously attributed *Desiderata* was found at the bedside of deceased Democratic politician Airlie Stevenson in 1965. Whatever the history of this poem, Ehrmann's prose is inspirational, and offers a simple and positive credo for life.

Desiderata

(Latin for “Desired Things”)

*Go placidly amid the noise
and the haste, and remember what peace
there may be in silence.*

*As far as possible, without surrender,
be on good terms with all persons.
Speak your truth quietly and clearly;
and listen to others,
even to the dull and the ignorant;
they too have their story.*

*Avoid loud and aggressive persons;
they are vexatious to the spirit.
If you compare yourself with others,
you may become vain or bitter,
for always there will be greater
and lesser persons than yourself.
Enjoy your achievements
as well as your plans.*

*Keep interested in your own career,
however humble; it is a real possession
in the changing fortunes of time.
Exercise caution in your
business affairs, for the world
is full of trickery.
But let this not blind you
to what virtue there is; many persons strive
for high ideals, and everywhere life
is full of heroism.*

*Be yourself.
Especially do not feign affection.
Neither be cynical about love,*

*for in the face of all
aridity and disenchantment,
it is as perennial as the grass.
Take kindly the counsel of the years,
gracefully surrendering the things of youth.
Nurture strength of spirit to shield
you in sudden misfortune.
But do not distress yourself
with dark imaginings.
Many fears are born of fatigue
and loneliness.
Beyond a wholesome discipline,
be gentle with yourself.*

*You are a child of the universe
no less than the trees and the stars;
you have a right to be here.
And whether or not it is clear to you,
no doubt the universe
is unfolding as it should.*

*Therefore be at peace with God,
whatever you conceive Him to be.
And whatever your labors
and aspirations,
in the noisy confusion of life,
keep peace in your soul.*

*With all its sham, drudgery,
and broken dreams,
it is still a beautiful world.
Be cheerful.
Strive to be happy.*

Invictus

by *William Ernest Henley*

Henley was a British poet who at the age of 12 was diagnosed with tuberculosis of the bone. His diseased foot had to be amputated directly below the knee and Henley persevered and survived the rest of his life with only one foot intact (remember that medical advances in the late 19th century were not like they are now). Despite his disability, Henley was discharged from the hospital after two years and was able to lead an active life for nearly 30 years afterwards. Henley died in 1903 at the age of 54. Incidentally, Henley became friends with Scottish writer and poet Robert Louis Stevenson.

Invictus was written while Henley was recovering from his hospital bed in 1875. The poem has inspired a number of familiar clichés and quotations.

Invictus

(*Latin for "Unconquered"*)

*Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the Pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul.*

*In the fell clutch of circumstance
I have not winced nor cried aloud.
Under the bludgeonings of chance
My head is bloody, but unbowed.*

*Beyond this place of wrath and tears
Looms but the horror of the shade,
And yet the menace of the years
Finds, and shall find me, unafraid.*

*It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate;
I am the captain of my soul.*