

It's (as Reinhold Niebuhr, 1935 in his "ancient anonymous" prayer, implied it was) a religious duty to "accept what cannot be changed." Great-souled as well as great-minded, Reinie himself changed, through the stages of his life, his notion of "what cannot be changed." The last letter I had from him was quizzical about what to make of the 1960s: "what is all this about 'violence'?"....This thinksheet has the simple purpose of raising to the status of continuous conscious insolubility the question of "social impossibilities." Negatively put, I stand over against, even also against, all those (1) who "know" what is socially impossible and also (2) who "know" what is socially possible....Ironically put, I am wishywashy on social action, a fact that makes me feel (1) guilty and (2) wise. But God calls me to act, on pain of being more guilty if I don't act than if I act unwisely...or what is grace for?

1. Admiral Lord Anson, in 1762, experienced the human limit, ie, he died. He invited the world's admiration for his travels, this appearing on the pedestal of the figurehead of his flagship: "Stay, traveler, awhile and view / One who has travelled more than you, / Quite round the globe...." But it seems he exhausted his interest with observation: he (as a contemporary said) "went round the globe but was never in it," and (as Disraeli said of him) "The circumnavigation of our globe was accomplished, but the illimitable was annihilated & a fatal blow dealt to all imagination." So he's a symbol of the technological West, which has become amnesiac about the illimitable (and therefore about mystery) and dull in spiritual imagination. These two qualities, openness to the illimitable and imaginative vitality, are necessary ingredients in social vision, ie, the dream of an improvement in the human lot--the dream that awakens on the exploration of social possibilities. If one, in personal contentment and/or cynicism, foregoes this dream and exploration, one is outside of biblical religion. The Bible declares blasphemous any piety evading this dream and this exploration. For me, the daily and frequent use of the Lord's Prayer restores the dream and reinvigorates the exploration.

2. The quotation that's this thinksheet's title is from an early 1870s' ST. LOUIS GLOBE-DEMOCRAT editorial on Susan B. Anthony, the ultimately successful suffragette. The editorial praises her purity, earnestness, courage (while most editorials in most papers were ridiculing her): "hard-featured, guileless, cold as an icicle, fluent and philosophical, she wields today tenfold more influence than all the beautiful and brilliant female lecturers that ever flaunted upon the platform as preachers of social impossibilities." Admiration, yes; but we can't know whether the editorialist considers the vote for women a "social impossibility": he probably did. And, if so, was wrong.

3. So what, now, is socially possible/impossible? I'd hate to be wrong about my judgments on this, but cannot possible be right in all my judgments on this, nor can anyone else. Where my vision requires social change, I see social possibility--and those who don't share this vision see what they consider my stupidity (viz, those to the "right" of me on an issue). Where my vision requires social change that I'm convinced we, humanity, can't manage, at least now, I see social impossibility, at least for now--and those who don't share this skepticism see what they consider my betrayal (viz, those to the "left" of me on an issue). As I am not now, and never have been, a good party man, I'm often thought "unpredictable" by friends and enemies, Sometimes even wishywashy. Certainly often unmannerly, manners being even more unforgiving than doctrines. (Conventional behavior is the bottomline devotion of most of humankind in every class, culture, religion. A fact I find frightening when I'm moved to unconventional behavior, and comforting when I contemplate that wisdom dictates slow change.)