

# Unsung hero Groot illustrates the path of serenity

“Serenity.” What do you think of when you hear that word?

Perhaps the famous “Serenity Prayer,” which is well known, especially through Alcoholics Anonymous and other twelve-step programs:

“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.”

I own a t-shirt with a picture of the spaceship “Serenity” on the front of it. This spacecraft appeared in the unjustly short-lived Joss Whedon TV series, “Firefly,” and the subsequent movie titled “Serenity,” after fans clamored for more.

The actor Nathan Fillion played the lead character in the show’s ensemble cast: Malcolm Reynolds, the captain of the “Serenity.” If you



Global Theatre  
C.S. Morrissey

are not a sci-fi aficionado, perhaps you know him better for playing the crime-solving novelist Richard Castle in the TV series “Castle.”

Fillion has a distinctive voice, and I didn’t expect to hear it when watching the popular summer movie “Guardians of the Galaxy.” But there it was, and I recognized it right away.

Although he doesn’t have a major role in the film, his voice does have a cameo. Listed in the credits as “Monstrous Inmate (voice),” it animates the blue alien thug who ominously threatens Peter Quill (played by Chris Pratt), also known as “Star-Lord,” as Quill enters prison with the

other Guardians.

In this striking scene, Star-Lord is rescued from a disturbing situation by Groot (a tree-like alien creature animated by the voice of Vin Diesel). With a raw display of mighty force, Groot puts the Monstrous Inmate in his place. Star-Lord will now never need to fear being overpowered by the Inmate’s menacing force, since he has an even more powerful ally in the mighty Groot.

Groot benightedly repeats the same line again and again throughout the film: “I am Groot.” Although its function in the film seems to be exclusively for laughs, in fact it turns out to signify one of the film’s main themes: namely, how



Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures

the power of an individual is extremely limited on its own, but finds its proper place instead by working as part of a team.

The Guardians become the unlikely ensemble of which Groot is destined to be a part. Ironically, his crucial role is often overlooked, and we observe how the Guardians continually take his presence as part of their team for granted.

There are things that the power of a lone individual is powerless to change. But yoked in cooperation with others, like Groot, an individual can courageously step in and “change the things he can” with a crucial intervention. Such an individual will make all the difference in the life of one of his fellows, as when Groot defends Star-Lord in the prison.

Further, people who would otherwise simply be sinners and outlaws, small-mindedly pursuing their individual self-interest, can better themselves by working in unlikely cooperation with others, placing their audacious tendencies in the service of the common good of humanity. A habitual criminal can be transformed by the virtue of courage, able to change the things that need to be changed, doing good by working in concert with other Guardians.

As Groot also illustrates near the end of the film, when he embraces his fellow Guardians, one individual can also achieve profound serenity in spite of a difficult and impossible situation. Secure in the knowledge of your place as an indispensable member of your team, “the things you cannot change” can nonetheless be embraced

with serenity.

The Serenity Prayer has sometimes been falsely but understandably attributed to St. Francis. Its basic ideas, however, originate in the teaching of the ancient Greek philosopher Epictetus.

But in its best-known short form, it did not appear until the 20th century. It owes its earliest formulation (1933) to the great Protestant theologian Reinhold Niebuhr. In a later version (1951), Niebuhr expanded the prayer to into its fullest form (see sidebar).

Pope Francis intervened to try to “change the things he can” when he heard that Miriam Ibrahim, a young Sudanese woman who converted to Catholicism before her marriage, had been sentenced to death. Even though she was pregnant, she had been convicted in Sudan of “apostasy” from Islam, since her father was Muslim.

She was also sentenced to receive 100 lashes for the crime of “adultery,” which is how the law viewed her marriage to a Christian man. As Miriam courageously refused to renounce her Catholic faith, she was also sentenced to death by hanging.

After Italian interven-

God, give me grace  
to accept with serenity  
the things that cannot  
be changed,  
Courage to change  
the things which should  
be changed,  
and the Wisdom to  
distinguish the one  
from the other.  
Living one day at a time,  
Enjoying one moment  
at a time,  
Accepting hardship as a  
pathway to peace,  
Taking, as Jesus did,  
This sinful world as it is,  
Not as I would have it,  
Trusting that You will make  
all things right,  
If I surrender to Your will,  
So that I may be reasonably  
happy in this life,  
And supremely happy with  
You forever in the next.  
Amen. □

tion and international pressure eventually secured her release, Miriam was able on July 24 to fulfill her dream of a private meeting with Pope Francis. We don’t know what they said to each other, but the Vatican spokesman said their 30-minute meeting was remarkable for its “affection” and “great serenity and joy.”

No wonder. It is an honor to be numbered among such outlaws and such Guardians. Not to mention, the very best source of serenity.

C.S. Morrissey is an associate professor of philosophy at Redeemer Pacific College. □