

# Incomparable pair

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [January 25, 2012](#) issue



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In this issue Rebekah Miles describes the key role that Ursula Keppel-Compton Niebuhr played in the development of her husband's thinking and writing ( ["Uncredited"](#)). The couple's regular, spirited conversations often forced Reinhold Niebuhr to rethink his positions and sharpen his conclusions.

The article sent me to the bookshelf for *The Serenity Prayer*, the fascinating account by the Niebuhrs' daughter, Elisabeth Sifton, not only of the famous prayer attributed to Reinhold but of her parents' life together.

Sifton remembers: "My mother brought to Pa's personal intellectual life . . . a welcome dose of English skepticism, with her dislike of woozy German profundity and academic pretension." Ursula Niebuhr's love of the liturgy and music of the Church of England conflicted with her husband's preference for "the freewheeling improvisational daily prayers and stem-winding sermons of the Evangelical tradition. This liturgical discord was to create a lively, sometimes difficult ground bass in the music of my childhood."

Sifton also remembers Niebuhr delivering the Gifford Lectures in 1940 at the University of Edinburgh (compiled in *The Nature and Destiny of Man* and dedicated to his wife): "German planes were bombing the nearby bridge over the Firth of Forth. . . . Many of his text's most difficult passages . . . were presented to an audience who couldn't hear the words above the din of anti-aircraft artillery."

Especially in this presidential election year, when religious belief is often invoked triumphalistically or blindly, I will be turning to such works for critical insights on responsible Christian witness in a complicated world. We still need the Niebuhrian analysis of human sin—personal, institutional and political—to temper the rhetoric of American exceptionalism.