

THE WISDOM OF ANGER
PART ONE
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As I said in a recent church newsletter article, there is a special moment in my Sunday Service prep when I open a word file and title assigned to a given date headed my way and see what I get. I described it to be like opening a holiday present. Sometimes I click the file and find a nearly finished sermon I had forgotten, and get to do a little happy dance that some of my work is done. Sometimes there is very little there, and with a sigh, I set myself to action.

So when I opened the document titled "Anger," slated for today, and I found nothing but a sentence, boy was I pissed!

No, I am kidding. That's a bad joke.

The only thing in my file titled Anger was this one interesting phrase. "There is no final truth. There is no one thing that cures us or clears us of what it is to be a human being." That's it. No offering joke, or reading, or prayer, or guidance. "There is no final truth. There is no one thing that cures us or clears us of what it is to be a human being." It didn't have a source.

That's a weird single sentence to have all by its lonesome in a word doc. titled "Anger." Given I had no memory of creating it, or putting it there, or why, it felt important. Maybe even a sign.

I suspect I had quickly dumped it there under the banner of Anger thinking that either there is no single cure for anger or that that anger is the chief problem we can't cure ourselves from. Either way, that phrase is both profound and true.

It is true that we are not going to cure anger. It's, frankly, also a little sad too. For, if there were just the right ritual words, a spell to cast, a creed to pledge, any belief, social program, or political party that could cure anger, we would have long ago have mostly eradicated it like we have human sacrifice, cannibalism, and diseases like scarlet fever.

The thing about anger, true of all negative feelings, like jealousy, and envy, that we have been trained to resist, is that they are very hard to prevent. It is simple and a bit sad, but true. We humans are capable of curing diseases. We can adapt to different environments, and also in a way cure ourselves from oppressive and tragic traditions, customs, ideas, and religious beliefs. We can even make certain behaviors like human sacrifice culturally unacceptable enough that that they get purged from the future us.

However, it seems editing out human emotions like anger, jealousy, or greed are different. Impossible actually. I think this is important to remember and acknowledge. Pouring over the truth of the sentence projected above my head is the truth that we can largely alter human culture, but not what we might call human nature.

I was recently driving in my car North on the 405. I also comically happened to be singing along on the radio to a candidate for the sappiest song of all time, Debbie Boone's "You Light Up My Life." There I was, earnestly belting away "You give me hope, to carry on." I was seriously feeling the love until a gray SUV came flying up from behind and recklessly passed me on my right at about ninety-five miles per hour. I was in an instant scared and angry. Let me tell you, I wanted to light up their life.

So, you know what I did next? Nothing. My anger didn't last much more than ten seconds. It was tempered by reason, and the fact I don't have too deep a pool of anger that I can't escape.

There is a good reason we have gun laws and waiting periods.

Fast drivers are just one a list of things that with just a prompt can illicit an immediate but short-lived response of anger from me. It could be kids who don't behave, or someone double parked and on their phone, or intentionally loud motorcycles. Truth is, I carry around some anger that might be worth purging.

I have some anger that I suppose if I worked on it would make me a better person, but I am not going to. I'm not going to because, even if there is room for growth in this area for me, I don't think I have that much anger stored away. I'm over the idea that I am going to quell my short-lived reaction to fear and anger when it sneaks up on me like that SUV did. I'm not the Dalai Lama after all.

I'm probably overstating this. In truth, I do kinda want to be like the Dalai Lama, but I fear if there is a solution to that, I suspect it involves a lot of emotional and spiritual work. I'm more worried about completing my taxes, doing all the things I am supposed to do as one of the leaders of our church, and figuring out how to lower our cholesterol. And finally, end up being in some kind of blinged-out enlightenment. Frankly, I don't care to learn it.

However, my anger in that moment the SUV screamed past and in general came and went so quick that even if it might be possible for me to be so centered that I cannot be moved to anger, I was shocked with fear. I don't know that I want to be angry about that SUV, misbehaving kids, or the President, but I don't want to throw away my anger, because anger has a potency to it that is clarifying, emerging, dangerous, but motivating.

This sentiment was confirmed when I felt my own response to Trump's accusation that Greta Thunberg, the young environmentalist who had just won Time Magazine's Person of the Year Award, had an anger management problem. For a moment, and hopefully turned into action, so did I.

That really is my risky premise to this tough topic for the next two weeks.

So, unless your nervous system is broken, or you are a Vulcan like Spock, then you will get angry. We all will. In our sermon today, I believe calling anger as something to manage rather than something to extinguish is a good place for us to begin. I suggest we embrace that.

Let's begin by giving up on the idea or the goal that we will never get angry. That our capacity for getting angry is a given. If you agree, feel free to say it with me. "Our capacity for getting angry is a given." (I underlined "getting" in order to create a little foreshadowing.)

UU Pastor Jan K. Nielsen expresses this well:

Anger ambushes us. It can come unannounced and take both our bodies and our minds by surprise. We don't plan to get angry, and we usually don't plan to provoke another's anger. You might say, "Anger happens."

I like that, "Anger happens."

We are not going to be able to eliminate anger any more than we are going to be able to eliminate any body part we have deemed "... ugly and serving an unseemly purpose."

Anger, like compassion and our instinct to cooperate, is built into us because anger is a helpful survival instinct. "Fuel to do the uncomfortable necessary," I thought, and not to brag, but I like that phrase. "Anger is fuel to do the uncomfortable necessary."

I think that is a good way to think about it. We can't help but get angry. Angry just happens. And those are verbs, action words, rather than nouns, if my pathetic grammar is correct.

Anger just might be the best emotion in teaching us how fluid our emotions are.

And with that we are going to pause for a brief back and forth with your neighbor on this simple question. "Is getting angry inevitable."

I don't know what any of you said, but I have built some time into the end for some feedback.

What I do know is that we don't, in the religious world, tend to first see emotions like anger that way. Most world religions, born as our civilizations grew, share the universal suggestion that people of faith move toward practices of self-control, detachment, obedience, and meekness. There are, not surprisingly, a boat load of wise prohibitions from all faiths warning against anger. Mostly I agree.

As we either know or probably suspect, the CliffsNotes version of advice from Judaism, Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, and Buddhism is that with different accents and flavors, anger is a negative, a sin, part of the Devil's tool-chest, or a soul poison. To be slightly more specific, in the western tradition anger is depicted most commonly as rooted in our fallenness to sin, in the eastern tradition it is thought of as a soul poison.

There are of course odd notable exceptions in these sacred traditions. There is ironically, but not surprisingly, both praise for people smiting enemies, accolades for challenging infidels and killing heretics.

Within the world religious traditions we inherit, there are often in their legacies that overtly warn us against the spiritual cost of anger, encouraging words about the value of what frequently amounted to brutal crusades and violent jihads designed to defend and/or spread the faith. But ironically, anger is almost always advised to be a dangerous toxin to hold too much of. Ironically, usually, the real energy behind the vengeful behavior is left for God, or (the Gods), and the traditions tell us to be peaceful. Interesting, right!

Although I generally embrace these world-wide time-tested sacred cautions about anger, anger is unquestionably a problem. In fact, all you have to do is look at the physical and emotional damage done by wars and domestic violence, and gun violence alone would indicate that anger is a global health crisis.

And yet, we should also put in a word of caution about the religious advice that we be meek.

As Martin Luther King repeatedly stated in ways more poetic than this, meekness in the face of injustice is, well, as much a problem as a solution. Meekness is hardly the fullness of what we are called to be. I think the Christian call for meekness and turning the other cheek is overplayed. And when any religion overtly encourages quietude and passivity, that religion becomes guilty of Marx's critique that religion is the opiate of the masses.

Maybe built into religious opposition to anger is a bit of an early defense against the corruption of religious leaders and their institutions. Just saying! What better a way to keep your own adherents quiet. I would certainly love to see Catholics have gotten a lot angrier about the long history of priests' abuse of children, or regarding the sexist prohibition on women priests. And in evaluating myself, I could say that I am hardly angry enough about the injustices in our broader society.

Of course I generalize, but rarely in the sacred scriptures is there ever a word about anger being good for us, and certainly how we might manage it, and or harness it. Given how present it is in human behavior, a sermon on anger probably should try to say something about that. Anger should not be, as Beth Lefever beautifully phrased it, "Shorn from the fabric of human sentiment and experience."

We should never forget that the most powerful version of the wood has an energy, a potency, an edge to it. Let's not forget Jesus running amuck in the temple, angrily tipping over money-changers booths. But I would not be speaking my piece.

As Meg Riley, leader of our "UU Church of the Larger Fellowship" describes it, a more balanced morality would be "To animate rather than mediate. To jump rather than withdraw. To connect rather than detach." For me,

seeking meekness and obedience can be a compromise to the fuller us we can be, we should be. Meekness worries me. Meekness makes oppression too easy.

My well-focused anger, or something resembling it, might be the motivating force that increases the amount of police there are on the roads to change that behavior. Anger, or maybe more accurately, the righteous indignation that can be so closely associated with it, might help create a conversation, or even a movement. It is true that anger can start a war, but it mixed in with a few softer emotions, can end a war too. It worked that way with Vietnam. Didn't it?

Truth is, we all could have used a little more anger earlier about the war machine that produced Vietnam. Love too, of course, but at least a little of the resolve that comes from it.

Really what I think I am trying to say is that the best of what's good carries a firm conviction and grit with it. Without conviction and maybe an edge, being good is just being nice. And nice is not quite good enough.

Knowing the danger involved in this experiment, I would like to facilitate a little more comfortableness with our own sense of righteousness. However, we all know that is a dangerous path.

Now that we know that it has a useful power to it, let's indulge in a little anger. For those of us who are not too dramatically PTSD about anger, let's indulge a little in the dark fuel anger brings. Let's stick a little prop under the church door so that for a minute we allow a little sinister to waft in. Let's have ourselves a mini "festivus" gripe session. Get angry.

Take a minute to think of something that makes you crazy. I want you to clench your fist, grit your teeth and think about the latest news story that pissed you off. If you're looking for dark inspiration, think about the people we discovered who intentionally set what become some of our vast wildfires. Or the couple who trapped all those kids in their house for years. Or the last school shooting, or the one before that, or the one before that, or the people who are content want to do nothing about all that.

Whatever it is, turn to someone near you and tell them something that just pisses you off. Anything goes.

But there is a twist. I want you both to talk to each other, while you're griping about whatever you want to. And I don't want either of you to listen. Just talk over each other. Go ahead, I want you to cultivate your mean and your rude at the same time.

Anger at its best is the energy that comes from pain, fear, and feeling misanthropic. Doesn't that feel liberating? Energizing? But corrupting and wrong.

That is our take-away question for when we will walk in the room next week, when we flesh out more and finish our two-part look at anger.

AMEN