

THE WISDOM OF ANGER
PART TWO
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Turning the corner, enough open-mindedness about anger.

For those who were here last week, we started to look at anger, reflected on the history of all the world's religions understandably having prohibitions towards it, whether we thought anger was preventable, or a given, and asked if we thought meekness was as much a problem as anger. I raised the question if I thought anger could be a motivator to good action. We will return to those themes again today.

But if we spent most of our time last week leaving the sanctuary door prop open a crack to let some anger drift in, we begin today pulling that stopper out of the door and laying down some caution flares and hazard lights around the dangers of anger. Playing with anger is metaphorically like playing with nuclear energy, or a powerful drug.

Just as you we might all agree that getting angry, or anger, is natural, inevitable, not getting angry but being angry is unquestionably going to negatively affect your relationships, work, joy. When you have anger, rather than just get angry, you are carrying the makings of a disease with you. One that festers. One that can come to define the way you look at the world.

I don't need to tell you that warped anger is all around us. Anger gone wild is a terrible show available daily in the newspaper and TV news. We all have a mental file folder of personal examples of angry people doing destructive things to us.

Certainly, it is an easier and safer message to say that anger is bad. Any sermon talking the subject needs to clearly convey its deeply troubling impact we should hear a little of that sermon too. Here goes.

If you are harboring a lot of anger, and even worse spreading it around, maybe this is what you need to hear. So when anger flares up inside us, what do we do? In their sermon titled "Let Not the Sun Go Down on Your Anger" experts say one of the worst things we can do with our anger is to try to stuff it. We may not want to face our anger, much less the person or situation that made us angry in the first place. Too often, Jan K. Nielson says in her sermon, we try to take the easy path of trying to stuff our anger down deep inside. And that works for a while. Our bodies are filters. They, or we, can absorb some anger and so to speak digest it. However, get too much of it, for too long, or try to stuff anger down into an already troubled life, and you will cripple yourself.

Perhaps the most dangerous thing about anger is that it tends to have a hard time just being with itself. It tends to seek a source to vent upon to release it. It both carries with it a blindness to its full impact and tends to have a hard time just being with itself. Anger tends to seek a source to vent upon. Anger is not easily bottled up.

As Jan K. Nielson says beautifully in her sermon "The monster of anger is just too big to fit inside our bodies and our souls." She says, "Anger will eat its way through our hearts and pull us down into its grip." Carry too much anger within you and it is equivalent to suggest you have a disease. An emotional disease. Anger can make you scary to be around. Get too much of someone else's anger, too much of their affliction and pain, and this will not work. It will warp you.

We know people addicted to their anger. Germany in the Thirties turned frustration about the impact of war sanctions into an anger on the most disenfranchised in its midst. Here today right here at home we are focusing our anger of not being the world's only economic super-power anymore on the people who cross our own borders to do the hardest jobs, American citizens won't do. Anger is a better fuel for our engines than it is a steering wheel.

If you are a person who frequently feels anger, I wonder if you have evaluated the impact of it on others, or on yourself. One's capacity in an imperfect already challenging life to be happy is affected greatly by holding anger. Think about that price tag. Your anger is like that burning coal in your hand that you intend to throw, but before you can it ruins you.

I don't need to mention the shining example of how unhelpful, dangerous, and stupid a life lived out of unaddressed, misdirected anger is. We have been living with a shining example of that for almost three and a half years now.

Since the way we might describe feeling anger most poignantly, and I believe accurately, is to talk about it washing over us, or better through us. This makes its most natural modern parallel to anger to it being like a drug. And if anger was a drug—and in a way, it is—we would want to lay out its positive and negative impacts. We would want to know the symptoms it alleviates and the side effects it can cause. If there ever were anger in a pill form, that TV ad for the drug of anger might talk about "Its famous capacity to sharply focus our attention." Those words might be accompanied by the visual of an athlete with an intense glare, and a mama bear defending her cub. We might hear a narrator invite us to wonder if a little dose of anger might wash away "... some of the listlessness in your lives." Make us feel a little stronger and fiercer about whatever we struggle to attend to harms us or holds us back. If anger came in a pill they might want to refer to as an "ancient motivator," as "instant courage," or "a steroid for our emotional life." We see in this advertisement someone reaching for their bottle of anger, before they walk out or to confront a bully or robber. Anger would be sold as a "push" or a "motivator" for the peaceful, while we the audience see an empowered woman lift up a sign about some social wrong.

But soon enough in the ad they would be legally forced to talk through the unwanted side effects. We the audience might hear something like the following. "Anger's scientifically proven side effects include but are not limited to ... "cultivating an indifference to the suffering of others," "internal spikes in blood pressure that can lead to heart disease," "shaky nerves," "erratic decision making," "poor impulse control," "and the literal narrowing of one's vision."

The ad would have to tell how regular experiences with anger, either as its source or its target, commonly leads to depression and/or hypertension. Watching this ad, we the audience might see a boy pushing a smaller kid on the playground, a young woman scratching the side of a sports car with her keys, a guy with a furrowed brow head down carrying a gun towards an office building. Deep cautions would have to be on the label to not to overuse it.

If anger were ever available in a drug form, eventually there would be a class action lawsuit to ban it. In response, the pharmaceutical company that produced it would scramble to prove they didn't know how addictive it was, or how long it could linger in the bloodstream. Then either we wouldn't let people take that drug except under controlled circumstances, or the FDA would move to ban it.

So, we have walked both sides of the fence here. Add I think we all know the difference between anger that is a problem beyond the fight and/or flight instincts that arise. I want you to quickly break up in little pairs or threes like we did before and discuss whether you think for you to be balanced, you have more an anger issue, or a complacency issue.

As we quoted Rumi earlier, invite all of what you meet into your life as a guest. And I think Rumi is right, but I think the accent must be on the GUEST part.

I want us to draw a distinction between getting angry or having anger and being angry.

This is a fine, fine, line, and you're not going to get it exactly right. But it's an important topic. More for some than others.

The most practical advice possible is to not immediately behave from your anger, as much as listen to it. Anger is a good fuel, and a terrible driver. If you want to proactively act on the situation that made you mad, do it from a calm place. Listen to your body—are you animated to act to relieve a stress that has built up? You should know the signs. And rather than act out, get out.

Maybe I should not try to be interesting and preach the standard warning about anger. Maybe, all that is valid, but meekness can be as dangerous as anger.

As stated, inviting anything resembling anger into our lives is a dangerous game. And certainly, the time-tested wisdom from the world's sacred scriptures combined with our modern research would reveal that anger is destructive and should not be taken lightly.

Let's say this together if you agree. "Meekness can be as dangerous as anger." Or at least close, and I think we are bright enough to try to split that hair a bit. I think we know, or at least can know, the difference between an anger that is driving us, and an anger that is pointing something important out.

And if anger sparingly used helps us to stand up to those individuals and institutions that perpetuate the indecency of obscenely unequal distributions of wealth and resources, is a spiritual practice and anger a tool in that fight?

I trust that here, we mostly know when anger is too much, or someone is being a coward. We have seen and been both. See, to me there is nothing wrong with being a little angry. I would prefer to call it motivation to change what is more easily ignored, neglected. Is the opposite of anger, in this case, love, or is it indifference?

Some angers are worthy ones, and when Barbara Marriot or Rachel has yet one more because she is passionate, I call that anger a holy one. Maybe it is okay to poison yourself a little to be motivated to be a bit more engaged do a little justice. Maybe. Maybe delivered or utilized a bit like nuclear power is created, or like a quick acting drug, used ideally very minimally, sparingly, and cautiously anger is helpful. However, if we peaceful people might want to let it breathe a little will and conviction into us, we must be sure not to let it thrive.

And if it is a just anger, a loving anger, an anger that leads to a brighter world, let us not be too hesitant to strike the match. So, when you are feeling angry, stop. Ask yourself what that feeling is about. Is it about wanting a control that is unhealthy? Or lashing out in a way that is insensitive, or even simply not tactical? This is certainly not permission to be a jerk.

What we do with that energy we might not call anger, but might call resolve, righteousness, vigor. Don't give up on that. Everybody growl for me, like you are a werewolf. To the people who abuse those people and animals that are most vulnerable.

Don't worry too much about anger when it comes to you like a flowing stream, worry about where it starts to pool.

I am going to pass the microphones around for four to five minutes of final comments and critiques on this eternally important always shifting subject.

AMEN