



Sermon

There is a wonderful Sufi story about a Holy-man named Nasruddin and a philosopher who delights in arguing with him. The philosopher makes an appointment to quarrel with Nasruddin, but Nasruddin forgets and goes off to play cards in the park. The philosopher arrives only to find Nasruddin gone. He paces, swearing and cursing. As the minutes and hours pass the philosopher becomes increasingly agitated. Finally, he writes, "Stupid Oaf" on Nasruddin's door and storms home. When Nasruddin returns, he sees the door, realizes what he has done, and sets off to the philosopher's home. When he meets the philosopher he says, "My dear friend. I had completely forgotten our appointment until I returned home and found you had written your name on the door."

(story used in a sermon on anger by Rev. Rob Eller Isaacs)

You can tell a lot about a person by what they're angry about. For many years an acquaintance of mine was angry at her partner. Nothing the partner did was ever good enough and most of our conversations descended to her litany of complaints. Another friend is angry at his father. He's never received the approval he wants and struggles with the reality that it might never happen. Another has spent most of her life blaming others for her problems, unable to see that her behavior pushed people away. Now she's angry at herself because she couldn't see what was happening. There's my friend the political activist, finding energy when he can be immersed in righteous anger at the suffering in the world. Another has recently become a parent, and loves her child, but is angry at her loss of freedom.

Sometimes I think that each of us should write down our anger histories, because our angers have power to shape and define us. You can tell a lot about a person by what they're angry at. When I was in high school I was angry at just about everything. I was angry at my dad because I felt like he stood between me and everything that I wanted to do. I was angry at school because it was so cliquish and I didn't always fit in. Accompanying the anger was always shame, because we've been taught that anger is a bad emotion, one that should not be expressed. So I would feel the anger, and be ashamed of the anger, sometimes express the anger, and be ashamed by the expression of the anger, and feel even more helpless.

It is any wonder that we are fixated on anger. When I did a Google search with the phrase "anger issues," I got 86 million hits. If you watched my Facebook page this week you'll know that I committed to doing one anger quiz an hour while I worked on my sermon. It wasn't hard to find them. Everyone who thinks they're an expert on the human condition has created an anger quiz. Some were silly and shallow, some were really good, others were a marketing tool. Their quiz identified your problem and then tried to sell you their answer to the anger issues their

quiz told you you had. We are obsessed with anger, what it means, what it should mean, how to express it, how not to let it control you. Clearly I'm not the only one that has been caught in the anger/shame cycle.

Maybe this is why media personalities known for their anger are so popular. Maybe this is why so many people are fixated on Jon and Kate Make 8's ugly divorce. Jon can rant about his disappointment in Kate and be paid thousands to do it because people drink it up. Comedian Lewis Black can drip with angry sarcasm and it works because he speaks what so many are feeling. Radio host Rush Limbaugh can build himself into a steaming rage, and it's o.k. because it feeds those who fancy themselves as important as him because they share his anger. They will hold up their anger as proof of the rightness of their position. So we are given a double message. We are taught that anger is a bad emotion, one we have to control, then we are inundated with examples where unrestrained anger is paraded around as righteous and moral and glamorous.

You can tell a lot about a person by what they're angry at. What could one say about you, based on the anger you hold and how you express it? Do you nurse your anger like a prized possession? Do you fear your anger and try to bury it? Is your anger explosive and fierce? Do you take it out on others in a more passive aggressive way? Perhaps you are the kind of person who waits for the anger to subside so you can make a more careful decision about what you need to do. How do your values influence what you become angry at? Are you more likely to be angry at people or situations? Our anger tells a lot about our values and about what matters to us.

Tony Campolo, a well known progressive Christian minister, has a famous trick – he will use an inflammatory swear word from the pulpit and then ask the congregation how they can get offended at his language but not be offended at the fact that children are malnourished or the environment is being poisoned. So often our anger is directed at the wrong things and we miss what really needs the energy of our anger.

<http://revthom.blogspot.com/2006/12/sermon-anger-delivered-12-10-06.html>

Pema Chodron, a well known spiritual thinker and writer, says that it is the way of humanity for us to focus our anger on the things we identify as getting in the way of our happiness. That's what anger is - the emotion we feel when faced with what we believe stands between us and our happiness. When you've gotten angry at your parents, what are you angry at? Sometimes they've made a decision that you feel stands between you and your happiness. When you get angry at your teacher for giving you such hard assignments, you are angry between you feel all the work you have to do will stand between you and your happiness.



So often our response to anger is to try and change what we think is the cause of that anger. So if a person has made us angry, we try to change the person. If a situation has made us angry, we try to change the situation. If another nation has made our nation angry, we try to change the other nation, often through war, into what we think it should be so that we feel safe. And if we can't change what we think is the cause of the anger, it can lead to depression, more anger, and feelings of hopelessness.

There is a whole line of thinking embraced by people like Pema Chodron that our anger is really not about what others have done to us. Our anger is about what is in us and what needs to change in us. Authors Reshmi and Mahmood Siddique in their book "How to turn anger into love" say that "anger experiences in your outer life are a reflection of inner conflict, as life simply mirrors the inner spaces that need to heal. Anger, therefore, alerts you that you need to do spiritual work on yourself." So when you are faced with an individual whose actions seem to stand between you and your happiness that is a mirror reflection of an inner conflict that you are in need of healing. Your anger isn't really about them, it's about you. In fact, sometimes the anger is a sign that you are ready for healing.

Now I will admit that on one hand, I like this. Having spent many years blaming other people for my anger, it's kind of a welcome relief to think that I don't have to change them to be free from that anger, because we really can't change other people. If we can attain happiness through our own spiritual work, then suddenly we're not so helpless anymore, not so vulnerable to our anger or to other people and their choices.

But on the other hand, I don't think that all the bad things that happen to us are simply a reflection of inner conflict. If you grow up engraved by someone else's anger because you were sexually or emotionally abused, you haven't brought that outer experience to yourself because of some unresolved inner conflict. Someone actually did something to you. Let's not re-victimize you with the well meaning but hurtful proposition that everything bad that happens to us happens because we've brought it to ourselves. Some things should never happen. But it is also true that we cannot change what other people have done to us. We do have choices we can make about the inner conflict that has grown in us because of the wrongful things that happen to us, and the most important thing we can do is to choose not to pass on the pain that is in us to another person, especially the people who depend on us, the people who take care of us, the people who are closest to us. It is our responsibility to stop the cycle of shame and anger that damaged us. Sometimes anger is like a beacon of light that shines into dark corners that need our love. Sometimes we can do that work by ourselves, sometimes we need help. We need communities, friends, sometimes, a therapist.



In Unitarian Universalist theology, every aspect of human experience is considered a path to holiness and to wholeness, and that includes anger. William Ellery Channing, the grandfather of Unitarianism in the United States, believed fervently that we are made in the likeness of God. In 1828, at a time when it was considered a dangerous heresy to suggest that humanity could be kindred with God, this is what he wrote: "There is a spreading conviction that man was made for a higher purpose than to be a beast of burden. The divinity is stirring within the human breast, and demanding a culture and a liberty worthy of the child of God. Let [us] cherish a reverence for [our] own nature. Let us never despise it even in its most forbidding forms."

The foundation of our theology is that the wholeness of humanity, everything that we are, can be used for good. We are made in the image of god or the divine, with inherent worth and dignity. Everything we are has the potential to be transformed for the greater love that is in us and beyond us, which some call God, including those things that we normally think of as dark, that more traditional religions would call our depravity. When we experience jealousy, envy, bitterness, resentment, confusion, disappointment, even burning rage – none of these things are bad. They are part of the human condition, part of an evolving universe that has no beginning and no end. And every one of these experiences is a portal to the divine, whether that divine be our own deeper consciousness, the heart of an imminent all-present God or the evolving consciousness of humanity. Your experiences get woven into the interdependent web of all existence simply through living them with as honest a heart as possible. The blessing each of us has received from the moment we are born, is that we have been given free will and the power to make decisions about how we would like to weave ourselves into the web. It doesn't always go the way we want, but then we get to make new decisions about our disappointments. Are we being called to learn something? Are we being called towards a certain course of action? Are we being called to stretch in a new way? Are we being shown a truth we couldn't see before? Are we being called to reach toward someone else's raw humanity? How can this experience restore you to love and hope?

So when you feel anger.... Take it as a sign. You have holy work to do. Your anger is a tool you can use to live more truthfully and more authentically, a way to align yourself with your values and with the entire strata of existence so that this world and you draw closer to the wholeness that has been promised to us.

May it be so.