

“The Dance of Anger”
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June 1, 2008 – UUCM

I will be honest and tell you that I was inspired to write this sermon today partly because of some of the anger I’ve noticed flaring up around the congregation over the last few months and partly because I’ve had some personal experiences with my own anger in the same time period that I’ve been reflecting on. It seems like a good topic to contemplate in the context of our worship time together.

Anger is one of the ingredients of our messy human experience that many of us struggle with. Some people are uncomfortable with their own angry feelings, not to mention the uneasiness they experience witnessing another person’s temper. While others seem completely at ease with all aspects of the negative emotion – and may even enjoy the powerful feeling that comes from venting their rage.

I also want to lift up that anger, especially how we manage it, is a spiritual issue. When we are within its grasp we lose sight of our inter-connectedness. We stop being able to see and honor the spark of the divine in those around us. And if we are careless in how we express our feelings we can hurt people. Unless we learn how to articulate our negative feelings with care and compassion we run the risk of damaging the bonds of love and trust that hold us together in our families, friendships and our community.

My most recent personal experience with intense anger began several months ago. I was wrongly accused of something by a woman in my personal life with whom I have a very troubled relationship. Ever since I learned of the accusation I feel like I have been carrying around a very heavy load. It has been affecting every part of my life. I have been stressed out and grouchy at home and had a lower threshold with situations at church.

I confided in a few close friends about how frustrating it was to be walking around with this horrible cloud hanging over me. But directly expressing my exasperation to the woman who was causing it was not yet possible.

If you were an extremely optimistic person you could say I was given a wonderful and unique opportunity – to spend some time exploring my anger.

Anger is a vast topic. When faced with such a broad and amorphous subject I find it helpful to approach it from a couple of different perspectives. This morning I am looking at it through both a Buddhist as well as a Western lens.

The dictionary says anger is “a strong feeling of displeasure and belligerence aroused by a wrong.”¹ It is a broad umbrella term for a family of emotions that vary in strength from annoyance to fury or wrath.

In our Western culture we tend to think there are some forms of anger that are valuable, such as moral outrage or moral indignation. It can be a powerful ally, since it is filled with energy that we can harness and use to create change in the world. Malcolm X once said,

¹ <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/anger>

“Usually when people are sad, they don't do anything. They just cry over their condition. But when they get angry, they bring about a change.”²

While in Buddhism there are no forms of anger that are considered positive. Buddhist literature lists it as one of the Three Poisons, along with attachment and ignorance. Anger, from the Buddhist perspective, is a form of suffering.

Anger is usually a reaction we have to something or someone who is thwarting us. Psychologists found the most common events that bring it about are:

- 1) physical interference – think of how it feels when a group of people cuts in front of you in a long line,
- 2) frustration – like when, in the face of large governments and corporations, you feel personally powerless to affect global climate change, and
- 3) other people’s anger. I know from my own experience that it takes great effort not to respond to someone else’s bitterness with rancor of my own. When people yell, it is often our first impulse to yell right back.

There has been an ongoing debate in the psychotherapy world about the best way to therapeutically help people contend with their own anger. The wisdom for a while was that it is best to help clients express their negative emotions. Remember when it seemed like everyone in the 1980’s and 90’s was in therapy “getting in touch with their feelings”. Back then we thought that if we didn’t get our feelings out into the open for everyone to see – at all times – they would end up coming out in destructive ways.

But current research shows that encouraging clients to express anger, while it may make people feel better in the moment, makes them worse off in the long run.

There are neural pathways in the brain for emotions. When negative emotions are stimulated over and over it can actually reinforce the pathways. So if someone is angry at his or her parents for something they did to them in their childhood and they spend week after week with their therapist hitting pillows and primal screaming they could actually be strengthening their anger and rage and bringing it more present in their life.

Like most Eastern philosophies, Buddhism approaches anger from a standpoint of balance. Thich Nhat Hahn, the Vietnamese Buddhist monk gives this advice. He says, “When you are angry refrain from reacting, from speaking or doing anything. To say something or do something while you are angry is not wise. Become mindful of the anger. In your mindfulness you recognize and embrace the energy of your anger. You do this tenderly, without violence. Your mindfulness is you and your anger is also you. So you shouldn’t transform yourself into a battlefield one side fighting the other. You should not believe that mindfulness is good and correct while anger is evil and wrong. Anger is a negative energy and mindfulness is a positive energy. You can use the positive energy to take care of the negative one.

² Malcolm X (1925 - 1965), Malcolm X Speaks, 1965

He goes on to explain that, “If you get angry very easily it is because the seed of anger has been watered frequently over many years. You have allowed it to be watered. When we embrace our anger we can gain many insights. Maybe we find that the seed of anger has grown a little too big and that is the main cause of our misery.”³

It seems that Buddhist scholars and western psychologists are coming closer to an agreement that practicing mindfulness is the way to be freed from the grip of our hostility.

Cognitive psychotherapy focuses on the background thoughts that we are not aware of that continually trigger a mood. You know that constant mental chatter that happens behind the scenes every moment of your waking life. Bringing those thoughts into awareness offers a way to free us from their control. This is very similar to Buddhist mindfulness meditation practice.

One of the ways I’ve been working with my extreme frustration at the woman who accused me of wrongdoing is practicing mindfulness. When I bring my awareness to my thoughts I began to notice a pattern. The times I was the most acutely angry the running commentary in my mind was a string of defensive comebacks to both the current accusations and imagined future attacks by her. My psyche was in high defense mode trying to protect me.

Whenever that happens I’ve learned it is because underneath the armor I am also feeling vulnerable. As my feelings of helplessness about the situation increased, my anger likewise increased.

It is also important to be able to notice when your resentment is the result of your faulty interpretation of someone’s actions. Anger entails a distortion of reality, a skew in perception that exaggerates the negative qualities of things. All too often we become angry due to an incorrect perception. It is important to look deeply and ask yourself, “Am I sure I know what he meant when he said that?”

I had a friend once who used to have his feelings hurt by things I said in jest. My intention was playful; I was teasing him in good humor. I grew up in a family that teased one another affectionately. But he did not. In his family teasing was used to shame one another. So he interpreted my playful words as deeply hurtful and became very angry with me.

Once we both examined what was going on he was able to see that it was his interpretation that was leading him to feel hurt, and not my words. We brought mindfulness and compassion to our interactions and in the process deepened our friendship.

Thich Nhat Hanh suggests we “think of anger as a living thing. It comes up and it takes its own time to go back down. Just like when you turn off a fan and it continues to spin a few thousand times before it comes to a rest. Anger is like that.”

I know it can also take you over and surprise you with its vehemence. In an argument it can rise up as fury when you didn’t even know that you were that angry. Anger is like a wild beast that you are never quite sure of.

³ Thich Nhat Hahn. *Anger: Wisdom for Cooling the Flames*. Riverhead Books. 2001. p75

Buddhism says, “Nothing can heal anger except compassion” - but also that “compassion arises much more easily in response to suffering than in response to anger”.

It is true that I am able to have compassion for my accuser when in my meditation and prayer time I remember that she is suffering a great deal personally; that the whole thing has less to do with me than with her own issues. In those moments I can hold her in light and pray that she become free from all suffering. But it is really hard to keep that perspective at all times, especially when I’m faced with her animosity directly.

If we look at our culture today, and for most of the last thirty or forty years, there seems to be an increasing sense of dissatisfaction and entitlement. It is as if we carry an unconscious belief around with us that things ought to be better than they are. We are personally affronted that the world is not to our liking.

What has also happened in this time is as a whole people have gotten much more politically active. Of course, there have been people who were agitators, reformers and organizers in every era, but for the most part these people have been on the fringes of society. The loss of innocence of the 1960’s and Vietnam war era ended the blind trust in our politicians for more mainstream Americans.

And that is a good thing. I think the dissention and acrimony we see today is, in part, an indication of people’s sense of ownership and responsibility. In the same time frame the United States has become a much more participatory democracy. If there is one thing we can say about the Bush era it is that it has galvanized people’s participation – we have the highest voter turnouts in our recent history.

A parallel process happens in religious congregations. UUCM can be seen as a microcosm of the larger society. People in our democratic congregation have more of a sense of ownership of the community than people in churches where the minister and bishops make all the important decisions. When I see congregants get angry I know it is because they care, they feel acutely their sense of ownership. While it is uncomfortable, it is a sign of a healthy democracy. We just have to keep in mind our commitment to honor and respect one another in the process.

But, anger can only take you so far. I’m sure you have seen the bumper sticker that says, “If you’re not angry you’re not paying attention.” I get the point - that it is an indictment of people, especially people with privilege, who turn a blind eye to injustice and corruption. But I think that statement also implies that a permanent state of fury is the only intelligent response to the events of the world.

I think that if we are not paying attention anger can become a bad habit. Sometimes people use it as a way to maintain their sense of power and agency. It is their go-to emotion whenever things go wrong. They are always on guard for some transgression to befall them, no matter how minor, because then they get to legitimately lash out.

I suspect that the act of bullying people with their rage makes these folks feel stronger and better about themselves, but only temporarily. Ultimately they have to realize that it isolates them because anger only begets more anger in response. Soon people who would have been their allies have grown weary of always being on guard against the next outburst.

Expressing anger at an injustice is a necessary response – and a huge release of pent-up energy.

The story about my anger at the woman who accused me of wrongdoing has a pretty good ending – at least thus far. A mutual trusted friend helped to facilitate a face-to-face meeting between she and myself and I was finally able to vent my frustration in a way that she could hear. And it felt so good. It was a truly cathartic experience. I don't know how much it will change things between us ultimately, but just being able to clear my name in front of a witness has made me feel so much lighter.

In the final summation it seems anger itself is neither good nor bad – it is simply a fact of our emotional lives. Both the Buddhists and the Western psychologists and philosophers have important insights to help us understand it.

Anger has great power to motivate people to correct injustices. It should be used wisely because when it becomes a habit it actually loses its power to transform and becomes an obstacle to our growth.

How we communicate our irritation with one another is a spiritual matter. Unless we bring mindfulness to our rage we can get swept up in the whirlwind of its power and wreak havoc on our relationships. In the midst of it we only see from our narrow perspective –our sense of interrelatedness with others and our connection to Divine Love become clouded.

Think of this congregation as a practice ground. Here you are surrounded by people who will offer you plenty of opportunities to get angry – I mean offer you opportunities to hone your skills with anger - and forgive you when you mess up.

Let us learn together how to express our negative feelings with care and compassion so that we strengthen the bonds of love and trust that hold us together in this community.

Amen