

SERMON

“Fire in the Belly” by Rev. Jennifer Youngsun Ryu December 7, 2008

Anger—it explodes around us almost every day.

I'll bet we could spend the next few hours swapping stories of the angry people we've seen just this week. Of course, we're never the angry ones, are we?

Just a few days ago, a woman was driving right on my bumper scowling at me because I was going 35 miles an hour on John Tyler Road.

She was apparently in a big hurry and couldn't have known that I can't afford another speeding ticket!

Then there was that man yelling at the poor teller at my bank. I felt sorry for both of them.

The news is certainly full of anger: people beating and shooting their neighbors; nations and tribes bombing each other.

Anger expressed as an outward attack is obviously harmful, but so is unexpressed anger. This is the anger that quietly mushrooms into resentment and bitterness. It may not draw blood or break bones, but it does harm. It harms the soul of the one who holds anger in, and it harms the relationships that person tries to have.

William Blake describes how this kind of anger grows, in his poem, “A Poison Tree:”

“I was angry with my friend:
I told my wrath, my wrath did end.
I was angry with my foe:
I told it not, my wrath did grow.
And I water'd it in fears,
Night and morning with my tears;
And I sunned it with smiles,
And with soft deceitful wiles.
And it grew both day and night.”

Quiet, seething anger builds up inside and grows into a hard, bitter fruit that obscures the pure heart and blocks our connection with the divine.

Clearly, the world would be a much better place if we could get rid of anger, right?

Haven't all of the wise teachers throughout time warned of the perils of anger?

Didn't Jesus preach from the mountaintop: “Yet I say to you that every one who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment?”

Didn't the Buddha say that “the instant we feel anger we have already ceased striving for the truth, and have begun striving for ourselves?”

Too many of us have had horrible experiences with either our own out of control anger, or the destructive anger of our mothers, fathers, spouses, or coworkers. We just want it out of our lives.

Renowned Buddhist Scholar, Robert Thurman supports this impulse, saying that our goal must be to conquer anger. “Anger,” he writes, “is inevitably destructive, never justified or useful.”

But people have been trying to conquer anger and get it out of their lives for thousands and thousands of years. Yet it is still with us. So maybe there's an important reason that it persists.

When I want to understand something about human nature, I turn to the authority of human experience.

What does the text of human life reveal? Read deeply, they reveal complex, ambiguous, and often contradictory lessons of life. Jesus may have preached that all who are angry will be judged, but he was mighty angry when he turned over the tables of the money changers in the temple. And he was more than a little annoyed at his disciples' lack of faith.

I once saw Thich Nhat Hanh get angry. The Vietnamese Buddhist master, now over 80 years of age, was giving a dharma talk in a hall of about 500 people. A man walked in, interrupting the talk, complaining about something that had happened to him. The venerable monk was visibly annoyed; his trademark smile disappeared.

I watched him carefully as he gently, yet very firmly drew a line of separation: *No, this is not acceptable behavior. I am offended, and you need to leave.* He showed us all that day that even a Buddhist can employ the fire of anger as long as it is temped by compassion.

Having read the sacred text of human lives, including my own, I have come to see that anger can give us important information. Anger points to hidden truths. And it hints at hidden power.

Thurman teaches us that as soon as "...irritation, annoyance, or disapproval burst into an irresistible impulse to respond in a harmful manner, you have become the involuntary instrument of your anger."

What if, instead of letting ourselves be an instrument of anger we could turn anger into an instrument that serves our soul? What if we could learn to let our anger reveal the deeper truths of our inner life?

I think most of us understand that when we get angry, there is something going on underneath the anger. Anger can obscure fear, grief and wound if we are not willing to look more deeply.

When I was a child, I spoke like a child, and I got angry like a child. I didn't have the ability to stop, look deeply, ask questions. Children feel their emotion and they immediately move into action: they bite, hit, throw, yell, cry.

But when we become more spiritually mature, we develop the capacity to slow things down and tell the truth about what is happening. We can step back to see that we are not our anger.

And then we can express that anger in a way that is honest and impactful, yet not harmful.

From the perspective of a witness or bystander, the person who explodes in anger is often seen as out of control-- someone to be avoided.

"Oh he is such an angry person."

"I can't stand it when she goes off like that."

"I am not going to listen to you if you're going to be angry."

Do you see how those comments shut down the telling of truth? Do you see how those judgments harden the listener's heart and block the flow of compassion?

Moving from the personal to a broader, social level, this same dynamic has been used and continues to be used by people who have power over those who have very little power.

Feminist theologian Sharon Welch puts it this way: "The most effective defense mechanism of those in power [is] the inability to tolerate the rage of those they have oppressed and an inability to hear what is being expressed through that

rage--the fact that they have violated something deep and valuable: the dignity of another human being. The self-righteous rejection of rage as a legitimate form of expression is itself a perpetuation of the cause of the rage. It is a way of denying the dignity of the peoples they have violated.”
(Sharon D. Welch, A Feminine Ethic of Risk)

Just because we are uncomfortable with anger doesn't mean that we should turn away from it. It may reveal some very interesting if not inconvenient truths.

It is certainly better to express anger rather than stuffing it just for the sake of comfort.
Unexpressed anger turns into a bitter fruit of resentment.
It leaves little room for the flow of joy, love, and compassion.
Silent, seething, anger blocks our connection to what Marge Piercy named “the holy fire in our core.”

As the poet reminds us, “We are given fire to see against the dark, to think, to study how we are to live. We are given fire to to bank-in-ourselves against defeat and despair that make us forget what we must do.”

This holy fire in our core moves us to love and create and dance and yes, to get angry when we see the trash and the smog and the hatred and injustice. Instead of suppressing it because we're afraid of its fury, we can let Anger become both the recognition that change is needed and part of the energy to bring about the change.

In the 1976 movie called, “Network” an anchorman broadcast his outraged right in the middle of the nightly news.

“I don't have to tell you things are bad, he growled.
Everybody knows things are bad.
Everybody's out of work or scared of losing their job.
banks are going bust,
shopkeepers keep guns under the counter.
We know the air is unfit to breathe and our food is unfit to eat,
and we sit watching our TV's while some local newscaster
tells us that today we had fifteen homicides
and sixty-three violent crimes,
as if that's the way it's supposed to be.
We know things are bad - worse than bad.
But I don't want you to protest. I don't want you to riot –
I don't want you to write to your congressman because
I wouldn't know
what to tell you to write.
All I know is
that first
you've got to get mad.
You've got to say,
'I'm a human being, dammit!
My life has value!'
Things have got to change.
But first, you've gotta get mad!...
You've got to say,
'I'm as mad as hell, and I'm not
gonna take it anymore!'”

I am NOT prepared to get rid of that aspect of anger. In fact, I think we need more of that energy. I'm mad as hell too!

Things have got to change. We can't keep on destroying each other. We can't keep ignoring each other and trampling each other. But first, we've gotta get mad.

Anger is passion fired by the flame of life. Anger is passion fired by the flame of life. And while that flame has the potential to destroy, it also gives light and warmth.

Anger can incite us to swing fists, drop bombs. It can "shape words that can pierce like bullets," and anger can motivate us to challenge oppression, can arouse our compassion, can inspire us to action

Unitarian Universalists have been described as reasonable, rational, polite. We have often done the work of justice out of a sense of duty, because it fits the picture we hold in our minds of what good people do. But can we also be fiery? Hot-blooded? Outraged? Made as hell?

I want to be gentle, and I want to be angry. I've been too quiet--too willing to tamp down the rising flames of anger, afraid something might get out of control, wanting everything to be calm. But that's not how I want to live this one wild life I've been given. I want to live close to the burning flame of life.

Living that close to fire can be dangerous. Even righteous anger can easily burn out of control and righteous indignation can be used to justify violence.

And so the medieval theologian Thomas Aquinas warned: "Anger is good in so far as it is regulated by reason, whereas it is evil if it set the order of reason aside."

But reason alone is not sufficient. Love must accompany reason. Love and reason can temper the hot steel of anger. Love and reason can transform anger from a tool of war into an tool of peace.

We do indeed stand in the midst of a burning world. "We are primed to burn with compassionate-love and justice, We are primed to turn inward and find holy fire at the core. See! under the trash and through the smog-- the candles our ancestors lit for us."

Our ancestors lit flames for us because the creation of justice is the task of generations. Our ancestors lit flames for us because we need fire in our bellies. We need that fire to make this world a more peaceful, more compassionate, more loving place.

This holy flame burns inside each one of us. Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine!