

## Holy Anger

Readings: 'Breathe' by Lynn Unger  
'Integrity' by Adrienne Rich  
'The Bad Old Days' by Kenneth Rexroth  
'A Just Anger' by Marge Piercy

Let us hear the words of Adrienne Rich again:  
Anger and tenderness: my selves.  
And now I can believe they breathe in me  
As angels not polarities  
Anger and tenderness: the spider's genius  
To spin and weave in the same action  
From her own body, everywhere, even from a broken web.<sup>1</sup>

What does it mean to let anger and tenderness breathe within us? How do we weave them together?

In my line of work, they say that the preacher often preaches the sermon they need to hear. Today, that is especially true. I am on a journey, recognizing my own anger and rage, making sense of it, trying to use it as fuel for the work of love. Because of my innate personality, the family I was raised in, and the expectations the culture places on me, I have struggled to express anger.

We know that the what is considered appropriate expression of anger is influenced by gender and other identities in our culture. The people who are allowed to scream "I'm mad as hell and I'm not going to take this anymore" are usually white, straight cis-gender men of a certain age with class privilege. For those of us who don't hold those identities, it can be harder to know how to express anger. It is not always easy to become angry.

This is my story with this. If you had known me eight years ago, you would have known a person who never got angry – or at least who said she never got angry, which is not the same thing. I had an epiphany about anger. I figured out what anger was. I had been misidentifying anger my whole life.

My realization came during a conflict negotiation and management class I took as part of my preparations to become a minister. I remember sitting in a generic classroom on a Saturday afternoon as the instructor shared the words that changed my perspective. She said that many people, especially women, misidentify frustration as anger. We say we feel frustrated, when we mean we feel angry. Anger and frustration are similar, but different in significant ways.

Frustration is a particular kind of anger. The good people at Merriam-Webster tell us it is 'a feeling of anger or annoyance caused by being unable to do something'<sup>2</sup> So, back then, every time I felt angry, whether it was at a huge system of oppression or a small personal slight, I would call my feeling frustration. I would direct my emotion toward myself and my perceived inabilities. Instead of directing

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<sup>1</sup> Rich, Adrienne. 'Integrity.' in *Later Poems: Selected and New: 1971-2012*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2012. page 75.

<sup>2</sup> 'Frustration.' *Merriam Webster Online Dictionary*. retrieved from <http://www.merriamwebster.com/dictionary/frustration>

my anger where it should go—at oppression, at cruelty—it was directed at me. “If only I could be better...” “If only I had done something differently...” I would not feel this way. And to take on responsibility for things you are not responsible for quickly turns your heart to slime. My anger, because I didn't even know what it was, couldn't be expressed in a healthy way, so was redirected internally or slipped out sideways as passive aggression.

I share this story this morning because I know it is not only my story. There are many of us who struggle to name anger when we feel it. This is especially common for women, as so many of us are socialized to be nice and kind and good. There's not a lot of room for healthy female anger in our culture. But this is not just a challenge for women, many of us struggle to express our anger, whether we can identify it or not in healthy ways. There is too much or too little. How do we get to the place of just right?

There is a lot of anger out there – only some of it is holy. For our purposes today, holy anger is the anger against injustice that motivates us in our social justice work and the anger at mistreatment that helps us advocate for ourselves and others. And there is anger that is decidedly not holy. There is the anger that is behind oppression. There is the anger of abuse. There is the anger that is the result of being too tired or too hungry. How do we know which anger is which?

Feminist Christian Ethicist Beverly Wildung Harrison said, in a powerful speech called ‘The Power of Anger in the Work of Love’ that is one of my primary sources today, that ‘Anger is not the opposite of love. It is better understood as a feeling-signal that *all is not well* in relation to other persons or groups or to the world around us. Anger is a *mode of connectedness* to others and it is always a *vivid form of caring*. .. To grasp this point—that anger signals something amiss in relationship—is a critical first step in understanding the power of anger in the work of love.’<sup>3</sup> That is how anger can be holy, when it shows us that we are not in right relations and calls us to mend the broken web.

I'm going to spend most of this sermon talking about holy anger, the anger that converts to fuel for the work of love. First, I have wisdom to pass along about on how we move through the unholy anger, the regular anger that flares in us from time to time. Many of us have been told to redirect the aggression that sometimes comes with anger – punch a pillow instead of your brother, and the like. Studies also show that expressing anger in aggressive ways – even if it's harmless aggressive ways like punching that pillow or going into a room by yourself to scream – generally reinforces the feeling of anger and makes us quicker to anger in the future.<sup>4</sup> Instead, exercise. Exercise is a powerful way to manage anger. Scientists think it might have something to do with increasing serotonin levels.<sup>5</sup> It works both before and during feeling angry. If you know you are going to be in a situation where you'll likely get angry, exercise first, and the anger will be easier to manage. Exercise also helps when you're already feeling angry, if you are in a context that you can pause and go for a walk or otherwise move.

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<sup>3</sup> Harrison, Beverly Wildung. 'The Power of Anger in the Work of Love: Christian Ethics for Women and Other Strangers. *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*. 36 1981 Suppl. page 49

<sup>4</sup> Reilly PM, Shopshire MS, Durazzo TC, and Campbell TA. *Anger Management for Substance Abuse and Mental Health Clients: Participant Workbook*. Rockville, MD: Center for Substance Abuse Treatment, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2002.. Retrieved from: <http://store.samhsa.gov/shin/content//SMA12-4210/SMA12-4210.pdf> page 5

<sup>5</sup> Reynolds, Gretchen. 'Phys Ed: Can Exercise Moderate Anger?' *The New York Times*. August 11, 2010. Retrieved from [http://well.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/08/11/phys-ed-can-exercise-moderateanger/?\\_php=true&\\_type=blogs&\\_r=0](http://well.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/08/11/phys-ed-can-exercise-moderateanger/?_php=true&_type=blogs&_r=0)

Now, back to the holy stuff. Some of the best work done on holy anger is by feminists and womanists. Womanism is a term coined by the author and poet Alice Walker for a social change perspective rooted in the experiences of black women.

These thinkers tell us that anger is the feeling-signal that we are no longer in right relationship. It is information that something isn't right, whether within ourselves, in our relationships, or in the wider world. That anger, often, becomes the energy that fuels us for the action needed to return to right relationship.

Harrison continues, 'Where anger rises, there the energy to act is present. In anger, one's body-self is engaged, and the signal comes that something is amiss in relation. To be sure, anger—no more than any other set of feelings—does not lead automatically to wise or humane action... We must never lose touch with the fact that all serious human moral activity, especially action for social change, takes its bearings from the rising power of human anger.'<sup>6</sup>

Anger can be an expression of hope, an assertion that things can be better than they are, that relationships that are more equitable and a world that is more just are possible. Anger is a tool of our prophets, ancient and modern. And the prophets are one of the sources of our faith. Unitarian Universalism has six named sources of our living tradition. One of them is: 'Words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love.' I know of no one who confronts powers and structures of evil without anger. Holy anger is intertwined with prophetic action. As the Marge Piercy poem told us earlier, 'a good anger acted upon is beautiful as lightening and swift with power.'

The challenge of acting on anger is that we can't dwell in it, even when it's holy, maybe especially when it's holy. We need to feel it, identify it correctly, understand what's causing it, and convert it to something else or move through it. If we dwell in anger too long it devours us. This is a teaching of many prophets and many wisdom traditions.

Frederick Buechner, a writer and Christian theologian, writes about this beautifully, 'of the seven deadly sins, anger is probably the most fun. To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll over your tongue the prospect of bitter confrontations still to come, to savor to the last toothsome morsel both the pain you are giving and the pain you are giving back—in many ways is a feast fit for a king. The chief drawback is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is you.'<sup>7</sup>

The wise ones teach us that anger swallowed or dwelled in turns to slime or eats us alive. When our holy anger comes, we need to feel it, identify it correctly, understand what's causing it, act, and move through it. We need to return to the tools of the prophets, we need to return to justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love.

And one of the ways we transform our holy anger into the work of love is by joining together with one another. That is part of why we do church. The world, our relationships, our internal disequilibrium, can be enough to make us angry... and we know that by coming here and by working together to transform ourselves and transform the world, we can convert that anger into fuel for the work of love. There are so many ways to convert anger into love around here – I want to highlight the chance coming up on the

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<sup>6</sup> Harrison, 49

<sup>7</sup> Buechner, Frederick. *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC*. New York: HarperOne, 1993. page 2

evening of October 6 at the ISAAC public meeting. ISAAC is the congregation-based community organizing group that our church is a part of. We join with dozens of other congregations to turn our righteous anger into the work of love. If you are angry about racism, violence, and how early childhood traumas impact people for the rest of their lives, please come to this meeting. There's a sign-up sheet in the foyer. When we join together, we are powerful. We unite in holy anger, we create the world we dream about.

And we know that we are not always the angry one in our relationships. Others can be angry with us too. What do we do when someone is angry with us? Beverly Harrison lays out two options: 'we can avoid, ignore, condemn or blame. Or, we can act to alter relationship toward reciprocity, beginning a real process of hearing and speaking to each other.'<sup>8</sup> Choosing the second option when someone is angry with us is hard. We need to assess if their anger is holy. And if it's not holy – if the anger is abusive or cruel or the product of hunger or fatigue—it serves no one to engage it. If the anger is holy, we need to maintain the presence of mind to hear the other person, which is challenging. It's hard to listen to someone's anger, it can make us fearful and defensive. We can sidetrack the conversation with "tone arguments," saying 'I can't listen when you're angry. Come back to me when you've calmed down.' Demanding that people who are hurt, outraged, or oppressed speak in a tone acceptable to their oppressors continues the oppression. It delays justice. Hearing an angry person is challenging, but if we want to use anger for the work of love, it's a task we need to take on. We need to engage others' anger – not just our own.

We cannot deny anger, the anger we direct outward, and the anger directed at us. Beverly Wildung Harrison, again, 'Anger denied subverts community. Anger directly expressed is a mode of taking the other seriously, of caring. The important point is that where feeling is evaded, where anger is hidden, or goes unattended, masking itself, there the power to act, to deepen relation, atrophies and dies.'<sup>9</sup> Anger is the signal that we are not in right relationship. If we ignore that signal or don't act on it, we lose our chance to return to right relationship.

One of my hopes for this community—and for every religious community—is that we are able to practice this here. When the anger comes—and it will come—may we try to engage it and listen to what it teaches us about relationship.

May we be gentle and angry.

May we, peel away anger down to its core of love.

May we live into the dreams Dyrk read earlier. 'May all who enter here trust one another so surely that they dare to share the deep fires that burst into anger as much as the sweet spring waters that swell into laughter; the slow erosion of wounded tears as much as the soaring song.'

May we live with anger and tenderness woven fine as Adrienne Rich reminds us:

Anger and tenderness: my selves.

And now I can believe they breathe in me

As angels not polarities

Anger and tenderness: the spider's genius

To spin and weave in the same action

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<sup>8</sup> Harrison, 50

<sup>9</sup> Harrison, 50

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People's Church of Kalamazoo

From her own body, everywhere, even from a broken web.

May it be so. May we make it so. Amen.