

Revisoning Anger as a Tool of Wholeness

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A sermon on anger has to begin at home, because home is where we learn about anger. As I read about anger this past week I kept remembering instances in my family where anger, either expressed or unexpressed, made an impression on me. I encourage you to sift through your own memories of anger while I preach. While reading about anger there was several times I wanted to forget about the whole thing and preach on another topic. Reading about anger brought back so many memories; memories of myself getting angry, and memories of other people getting angry, memories of verbal explosions, and memories of free-floating, unexpressed, but ever present anger. The Native American film *Smoke Signals* ends with the main character reading a poem about forgiving fathers. I only remember one phrase from the poem, a phrase about fathers and anger. As best I can remember it said “fathers who scared us because they were angry, and fathers who made us anxious because they never got angry at all.” Anger comes in many forms, spoken or not, but equally powerful.

Everyone gets angry. Everyone. Anger is a challenging emotion with positive and negative qualities and potential. It can both heal and harm. It feels risky, energizing, frightening, and overwhelming. It is difficult to know what to do with such a powerful emotion, and even more difficult when we have seen others lash out in anger. The question we regularly face is how to manage our own anger, and how to deal with others as they struggle to manage their anger and learn from it.

Anger has been described as the “last emotion to resist numbness and despair,”¹ which makes it a positive quality. The Chinese language symbol *ch'i* expresses spirit, energy, and arousal. Arousal causes us to have courage and act. Without *ch'i*, we would relinquish the life force that motivates us.² Therefore anger is energy, a sign that we are alive instead of physically, intellectually, and emotionally dead. Author and surgeon Bernie Siegel explains that

Anger can be healthy. It contains an energy that can be used to heal, protect, or defend one's self...A patient who is a fighter is often seen as difficult, uncooperative, a character. Yet when I see these words in a medical record, I know that the person is more likely to be a survivor.

Anger is also a sign that something needs to change, and this makes it a tool for wholeness. In her book *The Dance of Anger*, author Harriet Lerner explains that anger frightens us because it represents change, and change makes us anxious. Lerner also explains that anger occurs in our struggle to balance self-identity with relationships, so sometimes we are afraid

¹ Ronald and Patricia Potter-Efron, *Anger, Alcoholism, and Addiction*.

² James and Evelyn Whitehead, *Shadows of the Heart*.

to get angry because we are afraid of offending other people. We are afraid that if we get angry, they will leave us. As a result we choose to repress our anger, which in turn makes us angry. If anger is helpful, how did it get such a bad reputation?

We have talked about one reason already; anger is powerful and frightening. Another reason is that Christianity developed at the same time as the philosophy of Platonism, which degraded and suppressed emotions and prevented them from being integrated in a healthy way. Platonism emphasized the dualism between spiritual and material, mind and body, thought and emotion. Matters of the spirit were considered superior, ethereal, serene, and rational. Emotions were considered inferior, earthy, passionate, and irrational.

At some point anger was included in the list of seven deadly sins, and no wonder, it was just as frightening then as it is today. However, sins, especially mortal sins, sent Christians to hell. Listen to this passage spoken by Jesus in *The Gospel of Matthew* (5:21-22).

I say to you that every one who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother shall be liable to the council, and whoever says, "You fool!" shall be liable to the hell of fire.

And I thought Jesus was the understanding one.

The God of the Hebrew Scriptures is even more frightening and confusing. He says, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay" (Romans 12:19). Now if humans aren't supposed to be angry, and if anger is a deadly sin, how come God is so wrathful and what does this mean? Does God "sin" in his/her anger? Is anger bad for humans but good for God, and if so, is this a God we want to intimately know? The Biblical message about anger is confusing and powerful, just like anger. Anger can be made into a deadly sin, but it won't go away.

My Grandmother, who was a devout Presbyterian, told me that she never went to bed angry. I'm sure she was influenced by Ephesians (4:26) which says "Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger." As an adult I have wondered what she repressed so that the sun did not go down on her anger. I know that I sometimes go to bed angry. If my relative repressed her anger in one place, surely it reappeared in another. And as I think back I know it did, subtly, but powerfully.

At this point it is helpful to look at how other religious philosophies view anger. In the article I read earlier, author Mark Epstein explains Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh's theory that "we must learn how to hold anger like a baby; we need to learn how to be angry, not how to express or repress it." Both Buddhism and the Chinese moral philosopher, Confucius, recommended diligently attending to anger. Not discussing, analyzing, or intellectualizing anger, but living with anger, being angry.³

In Western cultures we are not used to attending to things, let alone something as powerful as anger. We are used to acting. Buddhism and Confucius remind us that there is no pill, vacation, money, shopping, food, action, or spiritual panacea to remove anger. We need to learn to be angry, to hold our anger, so we can understand why we are angry.

Anger is often confused with other emotions, because so many of our emotions happen simultaneously. Two of the emotions most often confused with anger are love and fear. This sounds surprising. When we are angry we often feel hate, "the characteristic of savageness, like a provoked snake." It is easy to assume that hate is the opposite of love. However nothing could be further from the truth. We only hate the things we love. The opposite of anger is apathy, that "numbness and despair."

³ Ibid.

In some ways an understanding of anger came easily for me because I've been mad at God for years. I have such a powerful memory of coming to understand some of my anger ten years ago while working as a hospital chaplain and sitting in a peer supervision group. One day I blurted out how angry I was at God, for suffering, for sadness, even more importantly, for calling me into ministry. My colleagues were stunned, horrified. My supervisor was delighted. She said, "Tell us more."

Eventually, my honesty compelled every one in the group to admit that in some way or another we were all mad at God. Our supervisor helped us understand that anger towards God is a good thing, not a sign of disloyalty, but a sign of love and relationship. We only get angry at the things we love; our children, injustice in society, ourselves when we get older and no longer have the physical or mental health of our youth. My new understanding of anger was an asset as I continued to train as a hospital chaplain. I was easily able to listen to people who were angry with God, and people in the hospital are often *very* angry with God and when they meet a chaplain they want to talk about it (or yell which is also a way to begin talking about the anger).

Anger is also confused with fear. Theologian Andrew Lester maintains that anger is always accompanied by fear. Lester defines anger as a response to the threat of selfhood: to the physical self, the social self, and self-esteem. The threat produces anxiety, which in turn produces both fear and anger."⁴

I was not as good with fear. In my second week at the hospital I got into a public fight with a nurse, something unusual for me. I wanted to see a patient's chart. She wanted to see my nametag. It escalated from there, each of us one-upping one another, until I couldn't even remember why we were fighting, only that I felt humiliated, stupid, and trapped. And of course, since it was her floor, I lost.

Anger is not always expressed with words, like my fight with the nurse. In fact, it is frequently unexpressed, at least verbally as I alluded to at the start of the sermon. In *The Anger Workbook*, Les Carter and Frank Minirth list several different styles of anger such as nurturing critical thought, withdrawal and silence when displeased with someone, holding grudges, using sarcasm in humor, avoiding people you don't like, and blaming others for problems, just to name a few styles, and there are many more. Maybe you're like me, and when you're angry, you like to think it's someone else's fault.

When I went back to the chaplain's office after fighting with the nurse, I was discouraged. When my colleagues asked me why I told them that there was a really mean nurse on the sixth floor. I was doing well with this version of the story until I told it to my supervisor. She wisely asked me "What was your role, Sharon? What was your responsibility?"

Well, what was my role? If I didn't like the end result of our fight, which was that I did not look at the chart I wanted to see and I felt stupid, humiliated, and trapped, was there another way to go about it? Could I have made a difference if I acted differently? Painfully, the answer is yes.

Harriet Lerner explains

If our old familiar ways of managing anger are not working for us, chances are that we fall into one or both of the following categories: In the "nice [person] category, we attempt to avoid anger and conflict at all costs. In the [difficult] category, we get angry with ease, but we participate in ineffective fighting, complaining, and blaming

⁴ Carroll Saussy, *The Gift of Anger*.

that leads to no constructive resolution. These two styles of managing anger may appear to be as different as night and day. In reality, they both serve equally well to protect others, to blur our clarity of self, and to ensure that change does not occur.

At the beginning of this sermon I told you that anger is frightening because it means that change is necessary, and change provokes anxiety. As miserable as anger can be, often, so often, it is easier to be miserable than it is to change. Lerner explains “Repeating the same old fights protects us from the anxieties we are bound to experience when we make a change.” This is the crucial part where anger is a spiritual tool that can be used to create brokenness or wholeness. We need to embrace our pain and anxiety in order to heal and find the wholeness.

As I look back, I know why I got in that fight with the nurse, because I was scared. As a chaplain I had the right to look at charts, but I was new, self-conscious, and insecure. Instead of living with my fear and explaining to the nurse that I was new and needed her help, I ignored my fear and focused on my anger, choosing to fight in a way that left me feeling humiliated, stupid, and trapped.

But there is even more. I chose to fight because I was not ready to change. It was easier for me to engage in an unconstructive tit for tat fight than it was for me to either be honest about my insecurity or to clarify my role and claim my power as a hospital chaplain.

The nurse may have challenged me when she asked to see my nametag. That’s reasonable. She had never seen me before and unauthorized strangers should not be looking at charts. Maybe there had been a problem in the past, and if I had let her, she could have explained it to me. If she still refused to show me a chart I could have had her call over to the chaplain’s office or another department in the hospital to clarify the situation. Perhaps she did not know that chaplains could look at charts. Getting in a fight moved neither of us forward. I did not claim my role and she knew no more about chaplains, and perhaps thought less of us, than before we started. I used anger to foster brokenness instead of wholeness.

As Mark Epstein explains

We feel righteous when we are angry, but more often than not we end up being self-destructive. The grounds for annoyance are there, but we respond in a way that is savage. Like a forest fire, anger tends to burn up its own support.

Anger is determined by what each of us consciously and unconsciously wants. The question to ask is “Do I want to be angry for the sake of being angry or do I want to change something?” This is an especially powerful question to ask yourself if like many of us, the person you are angry with is dead. Even then, you can still take responsibility and change.

Lerner offers a quick list to help with anger including using “I” statements instead of blaming others, limiting your comments to the situation at hand instead of dragging in old ammunition (you know, the old “You never fight fair”), directly speaking to the person who has angered you instead of gossiping with other people, and sometimes it is best to wait so that you can voice your anger in a well-thought out manner that can evoke true, constructive change. And of course, never physically hurt anyone or anything when you are angry. Anger is not an excuse to abuse another person.

Lerner spends much of her book talking about “countermoves,” what happens when we use anger to make a positive change. She explains

Countermoves are the person’s unconscious attempt to restore a relationship to its prior balance...Countermoves are an expression of anxiety, as well as closeness and

attachment. Our job is to keep clear about our own positions in the face of a countermove – not to prevent it from happening or to tell the other person that he or she should not be reacting that way. Most of us want the impossible. We want to control not only our own decisions and choices but also the other person's reaction to them.

So no, I'm sorry to say, your child, partner, parents will not thank you for managing anger differently. They might even get angrier, and the process of change is so slow. I see and experience this most in my family, when one member takes a stand against the status quo in order to create a better future. We are angriest with the ones we love because we fear losing them the most. If only we could manage to say that instead of getting into one more fight, and if only we would remember that you are the only person you can control and I am the only person I can control.

Anger can lead to a healthy self-identity and freedom. It is a powerful tool, one of the best and most worthy if well used. We have feared our anger for too long. And our fear has made our anger fearsome. We need to love our anger so that we can accept ourselves, others, and hope to change for the future.