

# ANGER!

A sermon by F. Jay Deacon  
Preached at Unity Church of North Easton  
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Once worked at the State Hospital at Danvers — now closed — worked through the Chaplain's office as part of the necessary training for ministry — something they call Clinical Pastoral Education. Sadly it must be said that things like this go through fads. And the fad of that era was "getting in touch with your feelings." The patients, yes, and us, too, the chaplains. When we weren't on the wards with patients we could be found in the chapel arranged in a circle on folding chairs. Here the supervisors took great pride in teaching nuns to cuss. Here people were sometimes seen to throw chairs. The drill involved a good deal of bellowing. Once, walking on the hospital grounds, I passed the chapel and, through those old gothic stone walls, I could hear the supervising chaplains bellowing at each other. Getting in touch with their feelings.

There was, about that time, a popular little book called *The Angry Book*, with a red cover. *Get it out or you're likely to pop.* That's what we thought.

Well, of course, it's essential to be conscious of our anger. Then what?



The chaplain-supervisors at Danvers had in their religious backgrounds a lot of traditional images that they could draw on. After all, there was Jesus, hot-headed reformer, kicking over the money changers' tables in the Temple

## THE READINGS

*Marilynne Robinson, Gilead:*

A little too much anger, too often or at the wrong time, can destroy more than you would ever imagine. Above all, mind what you say. "Behold how much wood is kindled by how small a fire, and the tongue is a fire" — that's the truth. When my father was old he told me that very thing in a letter he sent me. Which, as it happens, I burned. This surprised me a good deal more at the time than it does in retrospect.

My point in mentioning this is only to say that people who feel any sort of regret where you are concerned will suppose you are angry, and they will see anger in what you do, even if you're just quietly going about a life of your own choosing. They make you doubt yourself, which, depending on cases, can be a severe distraction and a waste of time. This is a thing I wish I had understood much earlier than I did. Just to reflect on it makes me a little irritated.

—pp6f.

*Anne Lamott, Plan B*

One reason I think we get so angry with our children is that we can. Who else is there that you can talk to like this? Can you imagine saying to your partner, "You get off the phone *now!* Now, *not* in five minutes"? Or to a friend, "Get over here, right this second! The longer you make me wait, the worse it's going to be for you." Or to a salesman at Sears who happens to pick up a ringing phone, "Don't you *dare* answer the phone when I'm talking to you."

No, you can't. If regular people spotted your hidden, angry inside self, they'd draw back when they saw you coming. They would see you for what you are — human, flawed, more nuts than had been hoped — and they would probably not want to hire or date you. Of course, most people have such bit parts in your life that they're not around to see the whole erratic panoply that is you. . . . If you need to yell, children are going to give you something to yell about.

. . . . .

I used to love to untangle chains when I was a child. I had thin, busy fingers, and I never gave up. . . . My mother might find a thin gold chain in a drawer, wadded into an impossibly tight knot, and give it to me to untangle. . . .

Lately our pastor had been urging us to act more like Martin Luther King, Jr., which I feel gives an unfair advantage to the more decent and humane people. The rage returned in me.

*Continued* 🗨️

and yelling untoward things at the Pharisees. And then there's the Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, wooooooh. Its God was a genuine hot-head who did terrible things to people who perturbed him, even whole nations that perturbed him. And the armies of that God rolled on their bloody way. His ill temper goes all the way back to the Garden of Eden.

And of course there is the central thesis of Jonathan Edwards' most famous sermon — "Sinner in the Hands of an — *Angry God.*" The ultimate role-model.

Then there's the Bhagavadgita [BOGuh vod gita], the founding Hindu scripture from the third century of the Common Era, with its God Vishnu disguised as Krishna in the chariot telling the hesitant prince Arjuna he's got to fight his enemies and wipe them out — it's his duty as king and warrior, his religious duty, and anyway God told him to do it so he needn't doubt the rightness of what he's about to do. Sounds a lot like Joshua, actually, whom the God of the Hebrew Bible, not a little jealous, he — ordered to go into Canaan and massacre all the men and women and children and even their animals for daring to worship the wrong God, to call the Ultimate Reality by the wrong name. Oh, there's lots more, trust me.



We've taken in all those ancient, outmoded images, even as human consciousness has evolved. We are capable of more, of better, but it's as if we are addicted to the old patterns. Our politicians get elected and reelected on the strength of it with their promises of capital punishment, with the Patriot Acts and preemptive wars, and one of our political parties deliberately portrays itself as the stern and punishing father. Our culture is filled with violence, as both the guns and the prisons proliferate.



But despite all that, there were other messages about anger, too, but they always

I've known for years that resentments don't hurt the person we resent, but that they do hurt and even sometimes kill us. . . .

I wondered whether I could try to love my president, as Jesus or Dr. King would . . .

In my head I saw the president, marching on an aircraft carrier, with his little squinched-up Yertle the Turtle mouth, like a five-year-old whose dad owns the ship. Which his dad probably does. Then I saw him in a photo op, signing papers, and something made me stop. I wasn't thinking about his legislation or his tax cuts for the wealthy — I just experimented with the idea that God loves him just as much as God loves my niece Clara . . . How could this be? It didn't seem right. But I stuck with it. And after a while I could feel the tiniest of spaces in the knot, the lightest breath between tangled links. In that space, I saw the face of a boy I used to know superimposed on the president's face, a boy named John who liked the smartest girl in first grade. When she wrote at her desk, she squinched up her face fiercely, intently, and John thought that expression was what helped her to be so smart. So he squinched up his face, too, when he read, for the entire year.

For a few seconds, I imagined my president doing this in first grade as well. Actually, I *remembered* him doing this, about a week before . . .

To be honest, I am never going to get anywhere with this president. But Jesus kept harping on forgiveness and loving one's enemies, so I decided to try. . . .

It meant trying to respect them, it meant identifying with their humanity and weaknesses. It didn't mean unconditional acceptance of their crazy behavior. They were still accountable for the atrocities they'd perpetrated, as you were accountable for yours. . . . I was fine, until I heard the latest bad news from Iraq, and my hostilities flared up again. It continues to be a struggle. I know that . . . trying to love the people in this White House is the single most subversive position I could take.

I got the chain out of the drawer and gave it another try, but I didn't have any patience. It crossed my mind to take a hammer to the miserable thing and bust it into pieces. . . . But something inside me got back to work. . . . So, tug, tug, poke, poke: I have to believe that if I do this, it will cause change . . . You never know exactly where the knot is going to release, but usually, if you keep working with it, it will.

rang with impracticality. Anger actually made it onto the list of seven deadly sins! — a *mortal* sin, lethal to the soul's life in God. Augustine said of it:

It is better to deny entrance to [even] just and reasonable anger than to admit it, no matter how small it is. Once admitted it is driven out again only with difficulty. It comes in as a little twig and in less than no time it grows big and becomes a beam.



What is this, *anger*, anyway? In the West, it's defined as a strong passion which is to do with displeasure, stimulated by a sense of insult or injury. It can run to "rage," which implies that you've now lost self-control, or to "fury," which Merriam-Webster's *Collegiate* associates with "an overmastering passion verging on madness." And then it lists "indignation," another form of anger, which it calls "a deep, intense, often righteous anger roused by that which one considers mean, shameful, or the like," and finally, there's "wrath."



Of course there's also the Jesus of the Sermon on the Mount. He refers back to the traditions that preceded him, with the angry Jehovah and all, but then suggests a further evolutionary step:

You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, "You shall not murder"; and "whoever murders shall be liable to judgment." But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment.<sup>1</sup>

Oh *well*. And there's the bit about loving not just your friends, which is easy, but your enemies too.<sup>2</sup>

Buddhism has been teaching something like that for two and a half millennia. Buddhism says that whether you have actually committed a murderous act or not, and whether there's an all-knowing "God" or not to judge you later and punish you — in your anger you have committed a negative "evolu-

tionary act" or karma that will take a toll on yourself and you'll be headed off in a downward evolutionary direction for having done it. If you read Emerson, you know he says the same thing.

A contemporary of Jesus — though they wouldn't have known each other — Seneca, the Stoic philosopher — gave us a fine essay on anger, which he calls "*this most hideous and frenzied of all the emotions*." And, he says, "some of the wise have described anger as 'brief insanity' — it is just as uncontrolled . . . intent on anything once started, closed to reasoning or advice, agitated on pretexts without foundation, incapable of discerning fairness or truth . . ."

Oh, and he isn't finished. Seneca goes on: No plague has cost the human race more. You will see slaughter, poisoning, charge and sordid counter-charge in the law-courts, devastation of cities, the ruin of whole nations, . . . buildings set alight and the fire spreading beyond the city walls, huge tracts of territory glowing in flames that the enemy has kindled . . . anger has cast them down; deserts, mile after mile without inhabitant — anger emptied them.<sup>3</sup>

But wait. Didn't Jesus stand rather boldly against injustice, enraging those rich and powerful whom his words indicted? and weren't Emerson and Theodore Parker two of the most powerful voices in America against slavery and racism and the shameful treatment of native American Indians? And didn't King and Gandhi and Mandela and Sojourner Truth and Margaret Fuller all lift their voices and spend their lives to make an end to violence and oppression and hypocritical structures of power?

*They did*. And we know this about them, too: They were all speaking out of an inner realm that is very centered and calm *even when fired by a great passion for righteousness*, that is never out of conscious control, like when I lose my temper and slam a door because Win-

dows crashed again.

They spoke of a kind of soul-force that so transcended mere rage or bitterness that the distinction is crystal-clear.



What a confusing tradition. So consider not what religious doctrine says Jesus was doing, but what it now appears the likely actual historical Jesus, the street philosopher and not the god, was *really* doing. If you read his Sermon on the Mount in Matthew or Luke, or read the Gospel of Thomas, you've got a very cool, spiritually-centered street-philosopher in the Cynic philosopher tradition, in a very civilized way gathering a crowd and skillfully, with a lot of guts, drawing people in to a very pointed critique of the structures of prejudice that prevailed in his day, and the structures of injustice, and of wealth and power. It was all blended in with a message of a different Kingdom of God — not a theocratic state but an inner state out of which people could see the world differently and live differently.

But note well: he did *not*, like the usual blandly inoffensive variety of preachers, duck the controversies, the public sins, the popular public sins of prejudice and hate and injustice and violence. He took them head-on. But how did he do it?

And it is at this that I think we have to aim.

I lived in Newark after the riots of 1968 burned most of the Central Ward of the city to the ground. *That* was a massive door-slaming, only it wasn't over a minor irritant like a computer crash. It was over the *big* stuff. Years and decades and centuries of grinding oppression and humiliation. It was justified. Fully. But it wasn't creative; it wasn't courageous. It was just — an explosion of rage.

Which brings to mind the time four or five years ago when I had just recently been diagnosed with this diabetes thing [diagn. 28 Feb 2003] that descended out of the blue sky and it's morning and I'm rushing to get to a meeting and I've ironed a particularly good white

shirt and then I go to do the obligatory finger-prick blood test and I try and try and can't get any blood and then I do and the blood gets all over the good white shirt and it's getting later and I have to go upstairs and iron another white shirt and I heat up the iron and — *hurl the iron at the wall!* Quite scaring the painter who's painting my dining room. But listen, I can tell you this: that iron learned a lesson or two! That iron will never again make my finger get red stains on a white shirt!



The American Buddhist Robert Thurman — in another little book, this one also red but this one really splendid — calls these explosive reactions — whether to a moment's irritant or whether to a massive crushing injustice — calls those explosions an *addiction*. “The addict,” he writes, “is seduced by the addictive substance by feeling that it will help relieve their bad feeling.” It's as if, in the explosion of fury, we think the fiery energy will burn away the obstacle or problem. It's an addiction to a mental habit that's so subtle it's almost irresistible.

That kind of anger, he suggests, has to be tamed by means of a or spiritual discipline or yoga.

And the yoga he recommends is a three-fold *patience*:

First, a patience that learns to tolerate the momentary pain by learning endurance.

And second, a patience that sees the other in the self and the self in the other and can therefore forgive.

And third — and this is the heart of it all — a patience that can carefully dissect what is going on within ourselves — that can observe yourself as if from a distance, with insight; that can, before exploding, go instead for *insight*, for focussed mindfulness rather than surrendering self-control to an explosive rage. This is the spiritual perspective of the Witness, capital W — the authentic self or essence of you that is not the accidents of circumstance

or pain or fear or resentment — it's the real *you* that can observe as if from a distance those accidents of circumstance or pain or fear or resentment or whatever and not identify with them.

It's a kind of *patience* because it doesn't get hooked by the immediate in-your-face trigger that provoked your anger, which threatens you, before which you might feel powerless. You are looking at that, and at yourself, from a place of quiet strength, maybe even from the place spiritual seekers and mystics have known as the very Ground of Being. What they mean by that is that Kosmic Consciousness when you really feel and experience your self as one with the very Life of the Universe, the creative impulse and intelligence of Being Itself that can handle whatever confronts you today. I wonder if you have experienced that?

In his great hymn John Greenleaf Whittier gives us the phrase:

*the silence of eternity*  
*Interpreted by Love*

or the final verse where he asks for the

*still dews of quietness*  
*Till all our strivings cease;*  
*Take from our souls the strain and stress,*  
*and let our ordered lives confess,*  
*The beauty of thy peace.*

But when I get distracted from this central awareness and consciousness — which is what I mean by the word, “spirituality” — well, then, I start to feel awfully exposed and powerless, and then I am a lot more likely to respond with mere anger or rage. Slam a door. Hurl a chair or an iron. In another situation or culture, maybe strap a bomb to myself and head for a crowded cafe.



When the first impulse of anger has been passed through *that* fire, the fire of patience — the patience of endurance, of forgiveness, and of transformative spiritual insight — then anger is transformed. It becomes creative transcendence.

*It isn't a matter of putting our head in the sand, refusing to look at reality as it is with its injustice and hypocrisy and violence, and pretending it isn't so.*

Remember, the very Whittier who wrote the words of that hymn stood alongside Emerson and Parker putting his life and career on the line to demand an end to slavery in America.

And there was India's great prophet and poet Sri Aurobindo, who preceded Gandhi to lead the movement for Indian independence and knew the insides of prisons. How was it that he could write:

*How long shall our spirits battle with the Night*  
*And bear defeat and the brute yoke of Death,*  
*We who are vessels of a deathless Force*  
*and builders of the godhood of the race?*

Later in that great poem he speaks of those who see this threatened yet promising world as he saw it — speak of them like this:

*I saw them cross the twilight of an age,*  
*The sun-eyed children of a marvelous dawn, .*  
*..*  
*The labourers in the quarries of the gods,*  
*The messengers of the Incommunicable,*  
*Carrying the magic word, the mystic fire,*  
*Carrying the Dionysian cup of joy,*  
*Approaching eyes of a diviner [hu]man,*  
*Lips chanting an unknown anthem of the soul.*  
*High priests of wisdom, sweetness, might and bliss,*  
*Discoverers of beauty's sunlit ways*  
*And swimmers of Love's laughing fiery floods,*  
*Their tread one day shall change the suffering earth*  
*And justify the light on Nature's face.*

No, this isn't the quiet of a cave somewhere. It isn't the peace of oblivion.

A popular Western Massachusetts therapist's widely-published advice is never to listen to the news or read it anymore, but instead create your own happy world as if the

brutal facts of the world aren't so. No, that's not what the greatest spiritual teachers would have us do. Creative transcendence takes it all in, faces everything, avoids nothing, and passes all the ugliness and wrong through a transformative fire within the mind and renders

what begins as anger  
into something else,  
something transcendent. Ask Gandhi or Aurobindo about that, or Dr. King, or Jesus the street-philosopher, or Nelson Mandela.

They turned anger into a joyous heroic energy. *That* is what we need so urgently right now.

They looked at an injury or an outrage and found in it a joyous invitation to take up the work of making the world anew, to find in that work the meaning and purpose of their lives and to discover in themselves that joyous

heroic energy, a furious fire for transformation — that makes every reversal and every defeat and every wound an occasion for that joyous heroic energy to rise within you and turn the ruinous devastating fire of mere anger —  
into a laser-light of truth,  
the generous flame of love,  
a white hot flame that burns away the ego and everything that is false,  
a surging energy of creation.

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For more on Anger, see Robert A.F. Thurman's superb little book *Anger* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).