

ANGER!

A sermon by F. Jay Deacon

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It's a time when there's a lot of anger in the air and maybe, at moments, you've felt yourself overcome with it.

It's also a time marked by the *manipulation* of anger. This is generally perpetrated by very deliberately by those who know they can get some mileage out of your anger, gratuitously. When there's a lot of stress in the public realm and people are hanging out their windows bellowing *I'm mad as hell and I'm not going to take it any more*, even if no two of them are mad about precisely the same thing, it's Glen Beck last June tenth saying Democrats had been using progressive revolutionaries to gain power and that the only way to stop them would be to "shoot them in the head." He said this with a Swastika displayed behind him, symbol of those evil people that you'll have to shoot in the head. Crank, crank, crank up the rage.



And I've gotta say, that kind of manipulation of anger really gets me steam up! But really I'm here to talk about anger itself, not so much its manipulation. Anyway, I've been promised my comments on the shootings in Tucson will appear in the *Union-Leader* tomorrow. Dunno.

I once worked at a Massachusetts State Hospital, at Danvers — a state mental hospital that's since been 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 cycles of fads. And the fad of that era was "get-

ting in touch with your feelings." The patients, a little bit — the thorazine had them pretty much beyond feeling a whole heck of a lot—, and us, too, us mostly — 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 great 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. Its theme: *Get it out or you're likely to pop*. That's what we thought.

Well, of course, it's essential to be conscious of your anger. To recognize, underneath a secondary cover-up emotional state like depression, the raw primary emotion: anger. Own it. *But 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 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. *I see what you've been up to. Now get out.*

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 since God was telling him to do it, he didn't have to doubt the rightness of what he's about to do if it's what God told him to do. Sounds a lot like Joshua, remember him? The God of the Hebrew Bible, a very jealous god, he — orders Joshua 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.



We've taken in all those ancient, archaic images, even as human consciousness has evolved. By now we are capable of more, of better, but it's as if we are addicted to the old patterns.



But despite all that, there were other messages about anger, too, but they always 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 [let it in], 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 Western world, it covers a range of things from annoyance to a strong passion that's 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 there's "wrath." But what's this *next* definition? Next is this one: "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."



Of course there's also the Jesus you find — not overturning tables in the Temple but in 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.¹

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

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 “evolutionary act” producing 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.³

But wait wait 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? Weren’t they angry?

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 and higher human possibility*, a passion that is never out of conscious control, like when I lose my temper and slam a door because Windows has forced another “update” on me and the “update” has disabled some of my expensive software that I rely on. And it just installed itself. I didn’t ask for it, it just downloaded and installed itself . . . *Oh, excuse me, sorry.*

An inner realm that is very centered and calm *even when fired by a great passion for righteousness and higher human possibility*, a passion that is never out of conscious control. Yeh.

They spoke of a kind of soul-force that so transcended mere rage or bitterness that you’d have to say they come from a higher consciousness. That consciousness is available to you and me today.



Consider what it now appears the likely actual historical Jesus, the street philosopher and not the god, was *really* doing down there in Galilee. 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 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 kind of Kingdom of God — not a theocratic state with armies 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 past and present, duck the controversies, the popular public sins of prejudice and hate and injustice

and violence. He took them on, head-on. But how did he do it?

And it's at *this* that I think we have to aim.

I lived in Newark, New Jersey, after the riots of 1968 burned most of the Central Ward of the city to the ground. *That* was a massive door-slamming, 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. Certainly. But it wasn't creative; it wasn't courageous. It was just — an explosion of rage.

Which brings to mind the time eight years ago when I had just recently been diagnosed with this type 1 diabetes thing [diagn. 28 Feb 2003] that descended out of the blue sky and I'm trying to get used to it, not liking it, 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 — *boldly hurl the iron at the wall!* I tell you, that iron learned a lesson.



Anger seems to be a response to feeling thwarted and wanting to remove an obstacle that stands in your way. Something lies in your path, immovable, unyielding, won't budge. You are thwarted, blocked, ANGRY.

Then: a blast of rage! Crackle bang boom! Ooooh it feels *powerful*. Delicious feeling, yeh?

Of course, it's a very brief, very temporary, very false sense of power. But for the moment it felt good. Woo hoo. You find you

can relieve that feeling of being thwarted and oppressed and you can feel powerful for moment.

And then try to clean up the wreckage.

And that, my friends, describes an *addiction*. An addiction; and "the addict," writes the American buddhist Robert Thurman, "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.

By the way, Thurman says this in another little red book, but this one is really splendid. It's called simply *Anger*.

I did notice that throwing the iron didn't cure the diabetes, and burning Newark didn't correct the injustice.

That kind of anger, Robert Thurman says, has to be tamed by means of a 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 the capacity to do that greatly expands your comprehension of what it is that's going on and what to do about it, and — it gives you the ability to forgive.

And third — and this is the heart of it all — a patience that can carefully dissect what is going on inside yourself — that can observe yourself as if from a distance, non-defensively, 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 *you* in the deepest sense — 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, by which you feel threatened, before which you might feel powerless. You are looking at that, and at yourself, from a place of stillness and quiet strength, from a deeper Self that is always arising fresh from the very Ground of Being — beyond the ego with its fears and threatened helplessness. You're seeing through a 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. That deepest and highest Self can never feel overwhelmed or thwarted.* I wonder if you have experienced that?

In our hymnal there's John Greenleaf Whittier's hym that 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, this deep quality of consciousness — 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.



Patience — 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 a transcendent creative engine at the heart of you, so that you can do what can't be done, and say what can't be said, for a purpose so high we don't most of the time even contemplate it.

And — *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.

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

You know, out in Western Massachusetts there's a popular therapist whose widely-published advice is never to listen to the news or read it anymore, but instead create your own happy unclouded universe where seldom is heard a discouraging word and the skies are not cloudy all day. No, that's not what the greatest spiritual teachers have done. Creative transcendence takes it all in, faces everything, avoids nothing, and passes all the ugliness and wrong through a transforming fire within the mind and turns

what begins as mere anger
into something else,
something transcendent, a great force of nature. Ask Gandhi or Aurobindo about that, or Dr. King, Emerson, or Jesus the street-philosopher,

or Nelson Mandela.

They turned anger into an ecstatic heroic energy. And *that* is what we need so urgently right now.

In the little irritations, they found a spiritual exercise to learn to handle anger differently so that in midst of the big stuff, they could look at an injury or an outrage and find 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 lies just beyond mere anger — that makes every reversal and every defeat and every wound an occasion for that ecstatic 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.



READINGS

from: *Destructive Emotions: How Can We Overcome Them?*, which is a dialogue with the Dalai Lama narrated by Daniel Goleman, with a number of thinkers including Paul Ekman.

Paul wished to continue his exploration of anger “because it is such a troublesome emotion — the emotion during which we are most likely to hurt others. First [he said], I believe that violence is not built into anger — not a necessary or biologically required consequence. I maintain . . . that what is built into the anger response is the impulse to remove the

obstacle that is thwarting us. That does not necessarily require violence.”

The Dalai Lama asked, “Are you saying that violence or harming others is not really the purpose or goal of anger from the perspective of the evolutionary theme — that, rather, the purpose of anger is to stop whatever is interfering?”

“This is my view,” said Paul. “I have listed here the most common events that precede anger: physical interference, frustration, someone trying to hurt us, another person’s anger. . . . Interference is the common theme for all of these.” One of the most dangerous things about anger is that anger calls forth anger. It requires great effort to be able not to respond to anger with anger.

from 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.