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 Arlington Street Church
 11 November, 2018

The CliffsNotes on Anger

“Anger greets us every day; ... [it] is both poisonous and popular.” Philosopher Martha Nussbaum is speaking. Conventional wisdom dictates that when we are wronged, we should use “justified rage to put ‘them’ in their place [and] exact a penalty.”

Not to be angry is to be spineless, a doormat. “Even when [we] acknowledge [anger’s] destructive tendencies, [we] ... cling to it, seeing it as a strong emotion, connected to self-respect.”

But, says Martha Nussbaum, if we think clearly about anger, “we can begin to see why it is a stupid way to run [our lives].”

This morning, I invite you to a reflection on three positions on anger: 1. Anger is bad. 2. Anger is good. And 3. Anger is inevitable; we need to learn to be angry.

1. Anger is bad.

How many of you have ever played Angry Birds? Released in 2009, it’s a video game featuring multi-colored birds trying to save their stolen eggs from green pigs. The birds, launched by slingshot, are aimed at the pigs, who are hiding under various structures. The object of the game is to destroy the pigs. I can’t even pretend to understand.¹

To the point, though, in valiantly trying to take out the pigs, the birds are horribly injured. An ancient Chinese aphorism says, “The one who would pursue vengeance must begin by digging two graves.”

The thing about anger is that it carries within it the seeds of payback. Payback doesn’t make sense; actually, it’s a “fatally flawed ... way of making sense

¹ The eighteenth game in this award-winning series was released in September, 2018.

of the world.” We tend to think that proportionality between the “crime” and the punishment somehow makes everything even. But it doesn’t.

However heinous the offense that made us angry, inflicting pain and retribution on the offender doesn’t restore to us whatever or whoever was lost. And seeking revenge is like drinking poison and waiting for the other person to die.²

2. Anger is Good.

Social ethicist Barbara Wildung Harrison, my divinity school professor of blessed memory, wrote an essay called *The Power of Anger in the Work of Love*. The title alone has stayed with me across the decades. Here’s just a little of what she means by that: “Anger is not the opposite of love.... [It] is a mode of connectedness to others, and it is always a vivid form of caring....

“[Anger] is better understood as ... a sign of some resistance in ourselves to the moral quality of [our] social relations, a feeling-signal that all is not well in our relation to other persons or groups or to the world around us....”

She continues, “[Avoiding anger] does not [make it] go away or disappear.... In interpersonal life, [anger] masks itself as boredom, ... low energy, ... blaming, ... [and] self-self-righteousness.

“Anger denied subverts community.... [Where] feeling is evaded, where anger is hidden or goes unattended, ... there the power of love, the power to act, to deepen relationship, atrophies and dies.”

Barbara Wildung Harrison concludes, “We have two basic options.... We can ignore, avoid, condemn, or blame. Or we can [express anger] directly, [as a way] of taking the other seriously, of caring, [of acting] to alter relationship toward reciprocity, beginning a real process of hearing and speaking to each other.”³

3. Anger is Inevitable; We Need to Learn to be Angry.

² This is another sermon, but it’s interesting: Aristotle believed that if we don’t want some type of payback, what we’re feeling is not really anger. It might be fear, or grief.

³ Barbara Wildung Harrison, “The Power of Anger in the Work of Love,” in *Making the Connections*, pp. 14-15.

We need to learn, but it is not easy! It has been said that “the remedy for all anger is prayer.”⁴ I commend you to counting to ten, actually — counting to ten or praying to ten — as a way to stop dissociating, re-enter our bodies, and calm our central nervous system: breathing in, breathing out; breathing in, breathing out.

Abba Agathon, a desert monk of the early Christian Church, said that when he sat down to pray, — another way of counting to ten — he was most likely to be distracted by unresolved anger: old grudges against those who had wronged him and schemes of retaliation and revenge. He said — and I love this — “Prayer is warfare to the last breath.” Counting or praying away anger is breathtakingly hard.

Vietnam vet and philosopher Paul Woodruff writes, “Our capacity for anger functions as our sensitivity to injustice.... Learning to be angry better is part of acquiring justice....”⁵

Learning to be angry.... Here are four brief illustrations:

First, I think of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. I always think of Dr. King. Do you remember the story he told about having to give up his seat on a bus to a white person? He writes, “When I was 14, I traveled ... to Dublin, Georgia with a dear teacher of mine, Mrs. Bradley, [to] participate in an oratorical contest. We were on a bus returning to Atlanta. Along the way, some white passengers boarded the bus, and the white driver ordered us to get up and give the whites our seats. We didn’t move quickly enough to suit him, so he began cursing us.

“I intended to stay right in that seat, but Mrs. Bradley urged me up, saying we had to obey the law. We stood ... in the aisle for 90 miles to Atlanta. That night will never leave my memory. It was the angriest I have ever been in my life.”

That was 1943. It wasn’t until December 1st, 1955, that Rosa Parks remained seated. The Montgomery Bus Boycott lasted more than a year — until December 20th, 1956. Dr. King had to wait 13 years for the source of that anger

⁴ For example, “Bless them that curse you, and pray for them which despitefully use you.”

⁵ This is an excerpt from the entire passage: “[W]e should not want to wipe out [anger,] but to bring [it] into harmony with reason.... Anger is to injustice as pain is to injury. If [we] do not notice pain, [we] may perish through unnoticed injuries. If [we] are unable to suffer anger, [we] may not recognize injustice and so be wiped out by the transgressions of others.... “Our capacity for anger functions as our sensitivity to injustice.... Learning to be angry better is part of acquiring justice....” As quoted in Rev. Galen Guengerich, *American Anger*, preached at All Souls Unitarian Church on 1/22/17

to be vanquished. And we all know that was only one facet of the daily indignities of racism. So what did Dr. King do?

He was angry, but he was unwilling to be defined by his anger, unwilling to become embittered. He knew that his destiny was bound up with every other living being on earth, and he refused to demean or be demeaned. He refused to sacrifice his dignity. He called for a war of nonviolence and he did battle every day, not with those who were the messengers of hate, but with the hatred itself — not with people, but with their ignorance and fear, with their twisted ideology and depraved theology.

Second, I think of Itay Epshtain, who works with the Norwegian Refugee Council, which provides legal representation to Palestinians who have lost their homes. My colleague, Rev. Galen Guengreric, asked Itay, “What’s your success rate?”

“Zero,” he replied. “In 15 years, we’ve never won a case.”

“How do you deal with ... constant defeat?” Galen asked. “[How do you remain] hopeful and optimistic as [you confront] ... human rights violations every day?”

Itay answered, “I’m not hopeful and optimistic. But [they] need help, and I can help, so that’s what I do.... [And] I swear a lot.”

I don’t know if Itay Epshtain can envision a future of peace for the people he serves. But he channels his anger into doing the next best thing. He helps. He swears. These are good starting places. And what else can we do with our anger?

We can cry. Sometimes we just need to let anger just drain out through our tears.

Writing and making art can help. It can force our thinking to slow down and invite reason into our internal monologue. When we get our feelings down on paper or express them in some other medium, they’re contained and less overwhelming.

Exercise can help. Good old fashioned exercise, or something creative, like smashing big bags of ice into the bathtub over and over again. I know a wonderful therapist who buys up old dishes at yard sales. She has an empty garage in which

her clients are invited to throw the dishes against the walls. Some combination of making a lot of noise and sweating it out can help.

And we can ask for help. I would also add that a good old fashioned heart-to-heart with someone who will listen and ask the right questions and love you through it all is a good place for anger.

Third, I think of Nelson Mandela. Imprisoned for 27 years, he struggled mightily against anger and the desire for revenge. He dreamed of a strong, successful nation, but he knew that South Africa would never succeed if the “two [sides] were [divided] by suspicion, resentment, and the [calculus of payback].” Focusing on a shared future, he said, “Your duty is to work with human beings as human beings, not because you think they are angels.”⁶

Just before Nelson Mandela’s release from prison, he was given a private cook. It was a terrible set-up: a once-powerful Afrikaner serving a despised ANC leader. It would have been so easy to see it as a dose of deserved humiliation. But Nelson Mandela wasn’t having it, and initiated a discussion.

“I took it upon myself to break the tension and a possible resentment on his part that he had to serve a prisoner by cooking and then washing dishes, and I offered to wash dishes.... He refused.... He said that [it was] his work. I said, ‘No, we must share it.’ Although he insisted, and he was genuine, ... I forced him, literally forced him, to allow me to do the dishes, and we established a very good relationship.... A really nice chap, Warder Swart, a very good friend of mine.”

And so President Mandela built a strong and successful nation by insisting on engaging in relationships between equals.

And finally, I think of Anoid Latipovna Rakhmatyllaeva. She tells this story from the time her native Tajikistan was at war.

Her husband had left for work two weeks earlier and disappeared; his brothers, too, were missing. Every day, she had to lock her two children into the house and walk two hours each way to work. There was very little food available. The city center was in ruins.

⁶ The Stoic Marcus Aurelius’ *Meditations* was smuggled onto Robben Island to give the prisoners “a model of patient effort against the corrosions of anger.”

Anoid is a piano teacher at the university. When she arrives, it is still early. Suddenly, a member of her department is running at her, yelling, “There are soldiers in the music room! They’re smashing the instruments!” Anoid begins to move toward the terrible sound. The other teacher stays behind, terrified; Anoid runs.

The door is open. Ten soldiers are hitting the instruments and kicking them around the room. They are dressed all in black, with black wraps around their faces except for their eyes. Their armor and machine guns are piled on top of the grand piano. Anoid has no idea which army they’re from.

And suddenly, she’s just had it. She’s had it with the war that is destroying her family and her city and she’s had it with these soldiers. She walks right in and up to the one who is beating on the piano, and in a loud voice she asks him to stop smashing the instruments.

“The instruments are very expensive,” she says, “and they will serve your children and your grandchildren in the future.”

They all stop and turn to stare at her. Suddenly, it is very quiet. She is alone in a room with ten soldiers. “If you want,” she says, “I can play the piano for you.”

“So I sat down, and I started playing the Moonlight Sonata. A few of them sat down, too. Others came closer to see how my fingers moved across the keys.

“And then one of them came even closer and asked me to play a Tajik folk song. When I had first walked in, they were all speaking Russian, but when he asked me to play, he asked in our native Tajik. So I played it, and all of them started singing along. They were like a choir.

“And then out of nowhere, a man came to the door, and he said something to them, and they stood up quickly, took their armor and guns, and left, shutting the door behind them.”

One year later, the war ended, and Anoid Latipovna Rakhmatyllaeva’s husband’s brothers — and then her husband — returned.⁷

⁷ Anoid Latipovna Rakhmatyllaeva, *Tajik Sonata*, as told on the Moth stage of Padida Theater in Dushanbe, Tajikistan

Beloved spiritual companions, here is the CliffsNotes on Anger:

Anger, poisonous and popular,
greet us every day.
We can ignore it, or we can change it.

Payback does not restore to us
whatever or whoever was lost.
The one who would pursue vengeance must begin by digging two graves.

We can count to ten,
and pray about it,
but that prayer is warfare to the last breath.

Dr. King was unwilling
to be defined by his anger,
unwilling to become embittered.
He refused to demean or be demeaned, refused to sacrifice his dignity.

Itay Epshtain navigates his anger
by doing the next best thing:
people need help, and he can help.
Help and swear.

Help and swear and cry,
write and make art,
exercise,
ask for help.
Have a heart to heart.

President Mandela built a strong nation
by insisting on relationships between equals.

Anoid Latipovna Rakhmatyllaeva
played the piano
and the war did end.

We can learn to be angry better.
Amen.