

“Beyond Anger”

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Today our focus is on anger—
an emotion all of us know from the inside out.
I invite you to settle into your seats,
take a deep breath in and out,
feel how your body is supported by the chair
and the ground underneath.
If you feel safe closing your eyes, please let them close.
Take another breath. Allow your body to relax.

Now I invite you to cast your mind back
and remember the last time you were *really angry*.
Take a moment to bring that time clearly to mind—
the last time you remember being very angry.
Who were you with?
Where were you?
What was happening?

Now ask yourself: what did that anger feel like in your body?
You might remember your heart pounding,
your hands clenching, or your neck and shoulders.
You might remember your breathing getting faster and shallower.
You might remember your vision narrowing, staring straight ahead.
Just notice what you remember, without judgment.
Remember to breathe in and out.
Just notice.

Now try to remember: what did you do?
Did you shout?
Did you hit something or slam a door or throw something?

Did you go very still and silent and rigid?
What did you do with that feeling of anger?
Just notice what comes to mind, without judgment.

And what helped you calm down?
Do you remember what it was that helped you feel peaceful again?
Just notice. No judgment.

Now ask yourself:
how does it feel to remember that time of feeling angry?
You might feel proud, or invigorated.
You might feel embarrassed, or ashamed.
Is there anything you might want to remember for next time,
or anything you might want to try to change?
Take a moment to let this experience sink in.

(Ring bell)

I remember a time when *I* was very angry,
and what I remember most is how it made me feel
separated and alienated from the people I was angry with.
My experience of anger was that dear friends and companions,
people I care about very much,
all of a sudden turned into “those people.”
Separate from me.
Clearly *wrong, wrong, wrong.*
At least, that was my anger talking.

I always think, when we start talking about “those people,”
something has gone wrong.
At church we constantly affirm our connection to one another,
to all people and all beings.
Our faith constantly reminds us that we are part of a larger whole,
all part of a larger family of life.
But, at least in my experience, anger is *separation,*

separation from anyone who doesn't happen to agree with me or give me everything I want, however misguided or impossible. Anger connects us to those who we feel to be on our side, or to those who we feel to be equally wronged by "those other people," and that connection can feel very good. It's great to feel that gut-level tribal bond with other people. But that good feeling comes at a cost: the fragmentation of our connection to the larger whole, friends and so-called enemies alike. That feeling of separation and walling-off is enough to make me want to transform my own anger.

Yet anger is also *information*, and in that sense I do value it highly. In my own life, I go back very often to the wisdom of Harriet Lerner, the author of the feminist psychology book *The Dance of Anger*. Lerner tells us that "anger is a signal." It can tell us that something needs to change in our relationships. Our anger may be telling us that we are doing too much for someone else, or they are doing too much for us. It may be telling us that a relationship is putting too much pressure on us to compromise our beliefs, our values, our dreams. "[T]he pain of our anger," she writes, "preserves the very integrity of our self."¹

In fact, the traditional Christian understanding of anger has a lot in common with this view. The great philosopher Thomas Aquinas, who lived in 13th-century Italy, taught that anger *is* fundamentally "a response to injustice,"² a normal and healthy reaction to a situation that is not right.

¹ Harriet Lerner, *The Dance of Anger: A Woman's Guide to Changing the Patterns of Intimate Relationships* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997), p. 1.

² Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung, *Glittering Vices: A New Look at the Seven Deadly Sins and Their Remedies* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2009), p. 118.

At least in this culture, we do tend to feel anger at injustice,
and we learn to express it very early on.
The picture on the order of service
takes me right back to my own childhood:
there was no one I loved as much as my sister,
but no one who made me so furious!
I think back to those childhood rages,
and sometimes they really were about things
you might say were objectively unfair or unjust,
however trivial from an adult perspective.
Like, if my sister got to push the elevator button twice in a row—
it wasn't *fair!*

But not all of my fits of anger were quite so justified.
I'll never forget our Great Halloween Costume Debacle
though it was many years ago now.
Both of us decided we wanted to be ballerinas.
But get this: my sister got to wear a *pink* ballerina costume
while Mom and Dad said I had to wear the not-nearly-so-nice
white ballerina costume. At the time it seemed so unfair!
But in the cool light of adulthood I have to admit
that my sister really did have legitimate first dibs
on the pink costume. She thought of the ballerina idea first.
It was only fair that she got to choose which color she wanted to be.
At the time, though,
I was still so *mad* that I had to be stuck with white.
Looking back, that anger was really just a fit of selfish rage
that the world was not willing to bow to *my* every wish.

Now, Thomas Aquinas was a very smart guy,
and he understood that kind of anger too.
He said anger goes overboard very easily and very often, in two ways.
First, he said, even if we're angry over something that really is unjust,
we can *express* our anger in ways that are destructive

and lead to more suffering, not less.³
Think of two groups of dueling protesters,
both out there on the street corner,
both standing up for what they think is right,
and they're so angry at each other
that they start to yell and insult one another.
How is that going to help anything?
How is that going to bring more justice and peace into our world?

The second way anger becomes a problem, Aquinas says,
is when we target the wrong object.⁴
If you've ever lashed out at a family member
when you're really mad about something that happened at work,
you know what I mean.
Or have you ever been furious at someone
for saying or doing something you just *know* was meant to hurt you,
only to find out later it was all a misunderstanding—
they really didn't mean to do it?
That's another kind of anger targeting the wrong object.

So, OK, to me that sounds like common sense as far as it goes.
But Aquinas's take on anger still leaves me a little uneasy.
I agree with him that anger is normal,
in the sense that everybody feels anger at times.
It's just part of who we are.
And I agree anger can be an inner cue to help us recognize injustice
in our personal relationships and in our world.
But I get stuck when he says,
we express our anger wrongly when we target the wrong object.
I get stuck because that implies there is a *right* object for our anger,
there are people whom it's inherently *right* for us to be angry at.
And there is where I start to feel uneasy.
My personal belief is that everybody in this world

³ DeYoung, p. 124.

⁴ DeYoung, p. 123.

is doing the best they can, all the time,
even when they do things that are destructive and hurtful.
So how does it make sense for me to be angry at someone
who is only doing their best?

I've been very deeply influenced by the critique of anger
taught by the 8th-century Buddhist monk Santideva.
Santideva says something that's a little hard to wrap your head
around, but makes so much sense to me.
Basically, the core teaching of Buddhism
is that we are all part of the same reality.
We think of ourselves as separate and independent,
but that is an illusion.
We are interdependent in every way you can possibly imagine.
We are not separate.

And one of the teachings that comes out of that core idea
is that our thoughts, our habits, our behaviors, everything about us,
have all been created and shaped by an infinite chain of causality.
People who behave badly have been shaped by countless factors
beyond their control.
They may not be able to do anything else but what they are doing.
So how does it make sense to be angry at them?
Help them if you can, absolutely.
Show them a different way to be, absolutely.
But why be angry?
It makes no sense to be angry at them for being the way they are,
because in a very real way
the entire universe has conspired to make them that way.
You might as well be angry at the entire universe.

This teaching is the root of the story Thich Nhat Hanh tells
about the young boy who realized how the habit of anger
had been passed down through the generations of his family.
When the boy understood how strong that habit-energy was,

he was able to forgive his father and see him in a new way,
as a victim who was worthy of his compassion.
Could we do the same for our families, our loved ones,
even our nation and our world?
The patterns of anger run very deep in all of us.
We learn them from our families and our culture.
And, all too often, we learn to lash out at each other.
We get trapped in cycles of blame and resentment and hurt.

But it is a wonderful thing that we are here in this moment
able to consider new ways of being and acting.
The past is what it is,
but here we have an opportunity to change our future.
With practice and commitment,
we can break those negative patterns for ourselves
and future generations.
We can heal ourselves and begin to heal our society.

Robert Thurman, the author of our second reading,
tells us the most important work
for people all around the world in this moment
is to use our powers of insight and self-control
to break the patterns we have inherited
that lead from anger to violence in our world.⁵
We will never be entirely free from anger—that's not the point.
Anger is a part of us just as love and compassion are a part of us.
But we can learn how to care for our anger
and use it in ways that are loving toward ourselves and others.

I myself was very fortunate to hear Thich Nhat Hanh
teach about anger some years ago in Boston.
I remember he talked about cultivating compassion
for the people who were hurting us, and cultivating mindfulness
about the sources of our anger,

⁵ Robert A. F. Thurman, *Anger* (Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 3.

so that we could express our anger wisely.
He has a very sweet teaching on anger: he says,

Just like our organs, our anger is part of us.
When we are angry, we have to go back to ourselves
and take good care of our anger.
We cannot say, “Go away anger, you have to go away.
I don’t want you.”
When you have a stomachache, you don’t say,
“I don’t want you stomach, go away.” No, you take care of it.
In the same way, we have to embrace
and take good care of our anger.⁶

I’ll never forget the way he taught us to take care of our anger
at someone we love.
He told us, first, take some time alone to think deeply
about why we are angry.
Have we misunderstood the other person’s intentions?
(This is just like what Aquinas recommends, too!)
How have we contributed to the problem ourselves?
We take time to think deeply and allow ourselves to calm down.

Then, if we still feel angry, that’s perfectly OK.
It means we have to tell the person we’re angry at.
And, he said, the only rule is, you have to use loving, gentle speech.
He coached us to speak to our loved one, or even write a love letter,
saying, “Dear one, I am suffering because I am angry.
I’m doing my best. Would you please help me?”
Imagine what it would feel like to be able to say that to your partner,
your child, your parent.
Then anger becomes a tool to bring you closer together,
to understand one another more deeply,
to relieve suffering and bring peace into the world.

⁶ Thich Nhat Hanh, *Anger: Wisdom for Cooling the Flames* (New York: Berkeley, 2001), pp. 54–55.

Not everyone will be able to say this.
Maybe the other person isn't ready to receive it.
It may be the other person isn't even around any more to respond.
How many of us are still carrying around wounds of anger
passed down to us from our childhood,
still struggling to make peace with parents and others
who hurt us with their anger, unskillfully expressed,
and with their violence?

I want to close with a meditation composed by Thich Nhat Hanh
on releasing anger and healing relations with our parents.
You can do this whether your parents are living or dead,
no matter how things are between you.
You can do this with any person in your life,
any relationship where you are hoping for some healing.
So, once more, I invite you to relax and connect with your breath.
Breathe in and out in silence for a moment.

*Seeing myself as a five-year-old child, I breathe in.
Smiling to the five-year-old child, I breathe out.*

*Seeing the five-year-old child as fragile and vulnerable, I breathe in.
Smiling with love to the five-year-old in me, I breathe out.*

*Seeing my father as a five-year-old boy, I breathe in.
Smiling to my father as a five-year-old boy, I breathe out.*

*Seeing my five-year-old father as fragile and vulnerable, I breathe in.
Smiling with love and understanding to my father
as a five-year-old boy, I breathe out.*

*Seeing my mother as a five-year-old girl, I breathe in.
Smiling to my mother as a five-year-old girl, I breathe out.*

*Seeing my five-year-old mother as fragile and vulnerable, I breathe in.
Smiling with love and understanding to my mother
as a five-year-old girl, I breathe out.*

*Seeing my father suffering as a child, I breathe in.
Seeing my mother suffering as a child, I breathe out.*

*Seeing my father in me, I breathe in.
Smiling to my father in me, I breathe out.*

*Seeing my mother in me, I breathe in.
Smiling to my mother in me, I breathe out.*

*Understanding the difficulties that my father in me has, I breathe in.
Determined to work for the release of both my father and me, I breathe out.*

*Understanding the difficulties that my mother in me has, I breathe in.
Determined to work for the release of both my mother and me, I breathe out.⁷*

(Silence—then ring bell.)

Continue to Hymn #1009 Meditation on Breathing.

⁷ Thich Nhat Hanh, *Anger*, pp. 217–18.