

“Letting Go of Anger”

A Sermon by the Rev. Dick Weston-Jones, January 21, 2007

Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Hillsborough, NC

Reading of a “love” letter from a wife to her husband in Anger, a novel by May Sarton

Dear Ned,

This is almost the only letter I have ever written you but I need to try to communicate with you after so much misunderstanding and anger lately. Please try to read this as from a gentle unblurred voice—it is very bad that we cannot talk. I know it is partly my fault. My quick temper freezes you into silence, a silence that seems to be becoming a permanent armor you cannot or will not take off.

You lay the burden of guilt upon me when you insist that I am simply an angry person and have been so since childhood. There is some truth in this but it is not the whole truth, Ned. I think you too are an angry person—I sometimes wonder whether everyone is not born angry, furious at having been torn out of warmth and safety and suddenly alone in what must seem a harsh cold world at the very start. But you were taught or learned quickly to bury your anger, to refuse to allow it out, and you have come to believe that if you do not show it, if you never let it out, that it is really not there. Your brother seems to have handled his anger by learning to attack first, to be always the attacker to preserve himself from attack—is that it with Paul?

My anger leaps out like a real demon and is terribly damaging to others—and to me. I am afterward filled with guilt and remorse and feel I am always in the wrong. But I have to admit that these sudden pounces out of the blue do break the tension for me and there is some part of me that recognizes that letting anger out rather than burying it is healthy. You will resist this idea with all your being. I suppose I am writing this letter to beg you to consider your own anger, not to deny that it exists.

We each have a demon or daimon, as it is sometimes called, only we handle it in opposite ways and maybe that is why we seem to be in a state of unremitting war. But, Ned, you show your anger by coldness, by withdrawing from me, by not giving, and if only you could see that this is perhaps as punishing as my violence, we might be able to make a bridge.... Whatever all this means to you when you read it, you must realize that I love you, and I must believe that you love me.

Ned, please read this with your heart, not as the prehistoric animal who hides itself away.

Anna

Sermon: Letting Go of Anger

The letter Anna Lindstrom wrote to her estranged husband Ned Fraser told about their fury with one another in May Sarton’s novel titled Anger. Each of us bears a cocoon of feelings through life. Like pain, anger is an unpleasant feeling that can be useful, alerting you to watch out. Something is threatening you. It takes work to find its cause so you can let it go. Anger is like a warning light. If you don’t find the switch and turn it off, you may leave it burning forever, using up your energy and running up your bill with other people. They’ll see your warning light, and probably avoid you. Unlike pain, however, anger is not a primary emotion. It always comes after another feeling that has been caused directly by something else.

We’re walking along talking when suddenly I am knocked over. My first feeling is pain. I’m also startled because I didn’t expect to be hit. Then I realize that you hit me and I get angry at you. We can’t always differentiate among our feelings. Our responses are usually so quick that we can’t separate them so I tie both the pain and the anger together in my consciousness.

I push you back automatically, and only then do I see a board fall and land right where I had been walking. You weren't trying to hurt me; you were protecting me. What are my feelings now? I'm embarrassed, and confused on top of the pain—and perhaps still a little angry. My feelings have run together so that separating them is even more difficult than when I had only pain and anger to deal with.

Two of these are primary feelings because they resulted directly from things happening to me: hurt and confusion. The embarrassment and anger were secondary feelings because they were indirect. I only generated them when I thought about how I was hurt. My thought told me you hit me. It was my thought that caused my embarrassment and my anger, not your act hitting me. When a moment later my thought told me you were protecting me, I felt grateful even though I was still a little hurt. My thoughts about the event gave it a different meaning.

What caused my anger was not your hitting me. It was my thinking about you hitting me. If I understand that I can let go because I can stop my thinking that way. Letting go of anger means I have to accept the responsibility for it. It's mine, always was and always will be. No one else caused it. No one else has to take it back. No one else can take it back. Only I can let it go by understanding how I generated it.

How do you let go of anger? First you have to acknowledge it. Some people displace their anger or smother it so effectively that they aren't even aware of its presence. Psychiatrist Leo Madow said there are three ways we hide anger from ourselves through our language: first by modified expressions of it; second by indirect expressions about it; and third, by depression statements.

Since we don't usually enjoy anger, we use these ways to "protect" ourselves and others from it. They're not much real protection, but the anger does get suppressed. 1. Modified expressions almost admit anger. We say things like "I'm fed up," or "I'm annoyed (but not really angry)," or "You make me laugh." We use these comments to tone down or deny anger to make it less offensive to others and ourselves. Many people have been trained to never show or admit anger.

Second, indirect expressions divert attention away from the anger. We say things like "You shouldn't do that," or "You know that's against policy," or "Mama won't like it." You try to give the anger away.

Third, depression statements let us hide anger within another emotion.: "I feel down in the dumps," or "I wish I were dead," or "I feel hopeless." It's not hopeless. You're angry. Own up to it. If it's really hopeless there's no sense doing anything but quitting. You'll never get that one ton boulder up the mountain, Sisyphus. (On the other hand if you quit deluding yourself about the hopelessness you might see that you could get 100 twenty-pound rocks up the hill, so maybe you shouldn't give up.)

Some people think it's healthy to "let it all hang out," just burst out with anger, so they can feel relief from the toxic effects of holding the anger in. Often that's not helpful because expressing your anger to others may cause more new trouble than suppressing it and living with the old trouble. You really can't afford to go around popping people. Focusing anger on others will probably stimulate angry responses rather than motivate them to help you. You're more likely to get what you want if you deal with your anger by yourself and later express your wants in a clear, non-angry way to those whose cooperation you need. But not telling others immediately about your anger doesn't mean you should deny it to yourself.

I interviewed several psychotherapists to ask them what they do with their own anger. One said he wasn't sure he was as good dealing with his own anger as he was at helping other people with theirs. After initial hesitation, each had a similar answer: "I jog," said one, "and talk to myself." "Out loud?" I asked. "Sure," came his reply.

Others went to private places and hollered, or went into closed rooms and talked to the absent person who had stimulated their anger. One had a caring partner who listened patiently to her expressions of anger. In each case there was a release of energy, a pounding or shaking or pushing or running it out. The verbal expressions had to be out loud. It's no good to sit and think angry thoughts. That only recycles and fortifies it.

Years ago when I lived near the ocean in Florida I found it helpful to walk the empty beach a few feet above a roaring surf and shout my complaints into the pounding waves where no one else could hear. The ocean is a wonderfully patient partner. I've also tried driving in my car with the windows closed, yelling all the angry words I felt pressing from within me until they began to sound funny. Then I laughed a little, and then I laughed a lot and I knew I was getting over the anger. I felt better. This isn't a bad idea as long as you don't run into someone. But I recommend finding a safer place to let it out.

Few of us hide anger well. It comes out in ways others see even when we don't. We carry years of conditioning into everything we do. Even the happiest person has distortions created in distant times with ancient relationships. How distant? The book of Exodus in the Bible warns that the sins of the parents will be visited upon their children unto the third and fourth generations. That may be true of anger too. Kids can still feel such ancient rage, feelings that really belong to their forebears that their parents taught them to feel.

While it's interesting to probe childhood memories for the sources of feelings, I think it's often more useful to deal with our own current behavior. That requires that we explore how we respond to conflict, and think about the consequences of our behavior. When thoughts and behaviors change, feelings will follow—even if we never learn how they originally developed or where they came from.

In the book Escaping the Hostility Trap Johns Hopkins psychiatrist Milton Layden suggests all relationships generate hostility in response to what we perceive as loss of respect. We're barraged by stimuli that leave us feeling inferior. That doesn't mean we think we really are inferior, but that our experiences produce feelings of inadequacy and failure.

I start the day feeling behind, pondering the pile of my unfinished work. Then, looking at my schedule I know I'm not going to finish it all. Certainly not today. That translates into a feeling of inferiority: "I'm just not up to all of this. If only other people knew how much I have to do they would understand and not ask me to do so much." The truth is that they'll keep expecting it, because they know you can do it. But if you know you can't, at least today, cut it back and do a piece you can feel good about. Do the rest later.

Random events also generate inferiority feelings. Driving off with just time enough to make an appointment, you find yourself delayed by red lights. Now you know you'll be late. You feel apprehension and guilt. Your self-respect shrinks. A car swerves in front of you and you feel even less respected.

When we're subjected to the anger of others our responses build upon the foundations of our own inferior feelings that have been accumulating. Layden says the generation of hostility is a normal response to this, primarily caused by the reduction of our feelings of self-respect.

We Unitarian Universalists say we value self-respect more than anything else. Thirty years ago a study of the value people say guide their lives showed that UUs ranked self-respect as the most important of 18 possible choices. Self-respect was 9th in importance with Jews, 7th with Protestants and 5th with Catholics, but first with Unitarians. Robert Miller, the sociologist directing the study said the responses suggested that our UU "value system is...characterized by inner direction, personal realization, self-fulfillment and self-actualization...[and he concluded that UUs appear to be] different from traditionally religious Christian and Jewish groups" who appear more outer-directed.

I doubt whether UUs actually value self-respect more highly than people of other religions. We may admit our needs more clearly however, because our religion doesn't tell us to look outside our lives for the ultimate source of meaning for us.

Layden says anger develops through a simple chain of events in our emotional system as we respond to the loss of respect. He says our feelings of inferiority generate anxiety and obsession with ourselves, leading to our hostility that we often suppress because we know we can't afford to show it. Instead we tell ourselves that we're superior to people who don't understand and appreciate us. As we express these feelings of superiority, others react to us with hostility leading us back to start the cycle again. We begin generating new inferior feelings in response.

How can we break the chain of hostility? Layden says regular practice of self-evaluation may uncover the sources of our inferior feelings, and show us that everyone has such feelings. If everybody has numerous opportunities to feel inferior, no one's to blame. Behavior is the key. Treat others in ways that support their sense of respect and they'll want to do that which earns the respect. They'll do that even if they don't realize they too are caught up in what Layden calls the "Hostility Trap."

He admits we may not always get the behavior we want from others because they may be too deeply caught in the Hostility Trap, or our influence may not be continuous or strong enough with them to overcome conditioning they're still getting elsewhere. But no one has to stay where she is, caught in other's hostility. You can choose to be with people who are not difficult for you. You can escape your own Hostility Trap and let go of your own anger.

May Sarton's unhappy couple, Anna Lindstrom and Ned Fraser met in a paroxysm of anger one night weeks after Anna had sent Ned her letter suggesting they were both angry people. Ned's first response was to tear her letter up and to refuse to discuss it. He had never let anyone come close to him, or even been able to tell her he loved her.

"Do you think you could listen to me for a moment, stop being defensive for a moment," Anna said gently. "Why is the only feeling you allow yourself anger? Please try to tell me...." "Anything else is too dangerous," he replied in an unguarded moment." But Anna was patient. Ned grew more open slowly. One night he told her about the anger he'd been harboring for years towards his dead father who had committed suicide when he was 10. With that Anna knew more about her husband than he had ever told her or anyone. Then he closed up again. Life does not change easily.

"Yet last night...for an hour or more," said May Sarton, "the struggle came out into light, and they had rested in each other at last. And as long as that had happened, there was the possibility of growth. 'If we could only not each feel so threatened by the other,' Anna had sighed. 'If only...'"

"But whoever thought love was easy?" said May Sarton. "Or that people change? No," she said, "The tapestry gets torn again and again and then rewoven in the same pattern and perhaps as time goes on our skill at reweaving becomes a little wiser and more compassionate."

It's possible, for a time, if you let go of your anger.

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