

2006-4-30 Anger Hot and Cold MLB
Mark Belletini

Opening Words

We are here
exactly as we are, our whole lives present with us,
to worship, that is, to join our own small stories
to the larger Story of the World, lasting beyond us.
Here, heart and mind celebrate as one.
Here, hope serves as our wings,
as memory draws strength from our roots.

So we begin together:

**Mindful of the responsibility our freedom presses into us, blest by the beauty of the world,
and drawn by a vision of a community known for its honesty, generosity, depth, love, and
justice-work, we focus our time together by the kindling of light.**

Sequence

So I hear that the polls are going to be open on Tuesday. All day.
Good. I certainly intend to go to them.
I certainly invite you to go to them and vote.
But I say they are not just open on Tuesday.
I say they are open every day.
Every hour. Even here. Even now.
Right now I am going to vote for the robin's egg sky, the vanilla clouds, the purple shadow
spreading under the ginko tree.
I am going to vote for tulips and redbuds.
I am going to vote for love that does not have to
run in someone else's circles in order to be love.
I'm going to vote the homeless into homes.
I going to vote the uneducated into classrooms,
that teach them in the way they best learn,
not the way it would be most convenient for me.
I going to vote the sick into healing.
I going to vote the lost into belonging.
I going to vote, right now, for the right to dream
of a world where the word *politics* doesn't stop me in my tracks, and where the word *honor* still
has a few good meanings left.
I'm going to vote right now for the power of free people to actually be free, no matter who they
are,
no matter who has abandoned them,
no matter who hates them.
I am actually going to vote for love.

I'm going to vote for truthfulness as the norm,
not the exception. I am going to vote for a world
that doesn't vote for killing, control and swagger.
I'm going to vote for you. I'm going to vote for me.
Right now. Right here. Silently. But for real.

silence

I want to vote for the folks who love me, and the folks whom I love. I want to vote for those who
are grieving, who are suffering, who are sad. I want to vote to hold them close to my heart, not
just today, but on Tuesday too, and Friday, and next Sunday as well. I want to name them right
now, aloud or within, so they are not lost in the tangle of my calendar and commitment. I want to
make them my commitment first. Right now.

naming

I want to vote for love. I want to vote for peace.
I want to vote for you and for me. I want to vote for thanks. I want to vote for music.

The First Reading comes from Julia Vinograd, the great social poet of Berkeley CA. This poem
was written in 1996. It's got an undeniably cheeky title and text. I am reading it partially
because last Tuesday was Yom Ha Shoah, the day set aside to remember the Shoah, that is, the
Holocaust.

WHY PEOPLE BELIEVE THE HOLOCAUST NEVER HAPPENED

Because we lied to them.
We told them an entire country turned into werewolves
or at the very least, went insane.
They don't believe us and they're right.
It was much worse.
One can plead innocent by reason of insanity,
the Germans weren't innocent
and they weren't insane.
They also weren't werewolves.
I even found a used copy of a novel by Goebbels,
An intense, clumsy story about love and patriotism.
It wasn't very good, but a person wrote it,
not a comic-book villain.
People are capable of everything.
We can talk inhuman atrocities
till we're blue in the face,
These atrocities were committed by humans.
Anything else is not just a lie,
it's a Nazi lie.
The Nazis claimed the Jews weren't human,

so we claim the Nazis weren't human.
Enough.
Everyone was human,
We should stop writing fairy-tales
in history books.
The truth is much more dangerous.
What comic-book villains do
ends when Spiderman kills them.
What people do,
people can do again.

The Second Reading comes from a Book in the Hebrew Scriptures, called Ezra-Nehemya. In the Christian Bible, this book is two books, called Ezra (Esdras) and Nehemiah. It may have been written as early as 400 BCE, but probably not until 350 BCE. The author is unknown. It's certainly not one of the glamour books in the scriptures. Since the BREAD meeting on Monday, May 8, is named after the main character in the book, I thought it would be enlightening to read some of it this morning, since it quite conveniently deals with social and personal anger.

There was a great outcry from some of the ordinary people, both men and women, against their sister and brother Judeans. Some of them were reasoning this way: "We have many children to feed, and we need grain in order to do that." Others said: "Why do we have to hock our fields, our vineyards and even our homes in order to feed ourselves?" And still others complained "Why do we have to get a second mortgage on our homes, just to pay the fool tax required of us? Are we not just as good as our sisters and brothers? Aren't our children just as deserving as theirs? Yet here we are, subjecting our own sons and daughters to the slavery of debt...and we feel powerless, since our fields and vineyards essentially belong to the bank."

I was enraged when I heard this outcry of complaint.

After giving the matter a great deal of meditation, I raised the issue, critiquing the nobles and governors with my questions: "Why are you pressing such hard claims on the loans you have made to your fellow citizens?" Then I gathered a great assembly of the people, and we said to nobles and governors: "Many of our Judean children effectually belong to other nations, other people, to whom they are now seriously in debt because of how you finance things. Are you going to do the same thing to your own children?" They kept silent, unable to answer. So I continued: "What you have been doing is simply not right. You ought to act in a way that conforms to the godly way we used to live, so that our enemies don't have plenty of evidence to reproach us for saying one thing and doing another. I intend to abandon any claims I have...I am asking you to do the same. We have to get things back on track by giving back the vineyards and farmlands to those who used to own them until they got taxed out from underneath their feet."

Sermon

Sometimes, when couples come to me to plan their weddings or union ceremonies, I ask them some questions. Questions beyond the *when*, *where* and *words* of the ceremony, that is. Like when they tell me their parents are divorced and not speaking, it's important to ask them how

they have planned for possible family conflicts at the ceremony. When they tell me that one grandmother, Sally, is a strong Southern Baptist and one uncle, Theodore, is Greek Orthodox, I ask them how their relatives will deal with the fact that the ceremony I do is in the style of *neither* of those traditions. And sometimes, when they stress their romantic, and clearly cuddly relationship, and I wonder if they can see beyond that bright shimmer of love, I might ask a few very pointed and personal questions too. Like “What is your style of anger?”

Often, people are surprised by the question. They say: “We love each other, so of course we don’t get angry at each other.” When my eyebrows go up, and I ask a few more clarifying questions, I usually find out that what they meant by saying that was that they don’t throw dinner plates at each other. So I clarify: “I didn’t ask if you threw plates at each other. I asked you to describe what your anger looks like when you feel it. Can the other person even tell?”

Then they usually get what I’m asking, and they go on to speak of their similarities and differences in emotional expression. Sometimes couples tell me later that they found that particular discussion helpful when they do get angry down the line.

Styles of anger. It almost seems like I am talking about fashion or art. But I assure you, the tiny two syllable word “anger” rarely sits for a portrait, and there really is no clear picture of it that works for everyone.

Oh, there *are* people who, when they get angry, actually throw plates. Of course. Or who want to break the world into smithereens, as Sophie wanted to in our story this morning. And there are other people who simply turn to ice when they get angry. I grew up with both the fire and ice styles of anger, in my own family. On one side, especially among the men, there was the Mt. Vesuvius style of anger, where smoke and lava belched out, destroying all the small, populated towns in the vicinity. On the other side, often, but not limited to, the women, there was the glacial form of anger, where arms were folded, eyes locked up under eyelids, teeth clenched, and at most you heard a chilling “humph,” followed by clammy silence for three days. Later, of course, I discovered other styles of anger existed in the world. Bitter sarcasm for one. Slice and dice wit. Passive-aggressive anger disguised as a big grin. Moralistic anger, complete with karmic sermons; you know “I’m glad that happened to you. Serves you right, you creep.”

And, yes, I also came to witness anger expressed with quieter emotional language, without so much as a single smoke-plume or ice-cycle. “Yes, I know you are refusing to ride with your sister in the car. I am wondering... how are you and your sister going to negotiate living under the same roof if you are so mad at her? She is not going to move out. You are not going to move away, are you? Yes, I know. You say she started it. Does that mean that she has to end it too? Maybe you and I can talk, when you settle down, to figure out what you could say to her next time you see her that might help end this. I know, it could take some time before your temper cools down. That’s OK. I am not asking you to rush. But you know very well this argument you just had has affected all of us...we were all going out to a movie, and now we are not. I am disappointed, and even angry that it’s not possible to see the movie tonight. But at least this time at home will give you and your sister time to figure things out.”

The first time I heard a parent talk to a child that way, I was stunned. It was not at all what I had ever experienced when I was growing up. And I liked it.

But when I tried to do this, I found that such an approach must take a lot of practice, because I was clearly not very good at this kind of anger. I had run so far away from the hot and cold anger that I grew up with, that I often denied I felt anger of any kind. I was fearful that I might hurt someone if I exploded, or distance someone for good if I became an iceberg. Often, the only way I was able to show anger was to cry, like Sophie in the story, which, of course, like so many in my day, I was told boys “simply didn’t do.” Which made me more angry. But I didn’t learn how to show it in a way that wasn’t scary or just symbolic. I still struggle with non-destructive expressions of rage even at this late age. I don’t want to be either hot or cold...I just want to be honest and clear.

Why do people get angry? Well, first, before I tackle that, I really have to address our physical natures. Some people, I’ve come to accept, are simply more prone to anger than others are, either for health, metabolic or cultural reasons. There really *are* people who can be said to have shorter fuses than others. Think of this as the deeper and more complex side of our Unitarian Universalist affirmation of the goodness of diversity.

And, there are more limited and time-bound physical underpinnings of anger which simply cannot be ignored...a good migraine, tremendous workload stress, or being out of work, or endless crises on the home front: these are all transitory but very real springboards for anger. And, my study of anger this last week reveals that the differing hormonal realities in both men and women often contribute to different styles of anger at different times.

But now that I have addressed the physical side of things, what is it that actually prompts our anger? This is what I think. I think anger has to do with two other words: *fear* and *value*.

I’ll tackle fear first. If I am afraid of losing control of a situation I thought I had control of, I might get angry. If I fear being treated unfairly, I might get angry when that happens. If I fear being rejected, I may get angry. If I fear that I am about to be abandoned, I may get angry. If I fear that I am going to fail, I may get angry. If I fear that once people know the true me, they will just turn around and walk away, I may get angry.

But the second word, value, is probably even more important. The values we hold are expressed in belief systems. I am not talking about religious creeds here, but mostly unconscious belief systems. Do I believe that my possessions are valuable, so that to lose them is a total disaster? Then I am bound to be angry, as Buddha warned us so long ago. If I believe my reputation is important, and people start telling stories about me, that serve to question that reputation for some reason, I am going to be angry. If I believe that my physical appearance is a valuable part of how I am in the world, and someone makes a comment about my hair style, my choice in clothing, my weight, my height, my posture, my whatever, even unintentionally, I will be angry. If I value my independence and someone or something yanks it away, ranging from an accident, to what my friend Anne calls “the vagaries of aging,” then I might get angry. If I value opportunities for progress and growth, and those are taken away from me for whatever reason, I may get angry.

Our identity, I think, is especially valuable. If you see your identity as a woman, or a man, or a gay man, or lesbian woman, or bisexual, or transgender person, or a person of color, or a differently-abled person, or an older person, or a younger person, *diminished in value* by some ignorant bigot, some flawed law, some cultural or religious foolishness, you're going to be angry. Identity can be assaulted by even some well-meaning, but rather co-opting inclusiveness, like "Oh, we all worship the same God anyway, right?" "Or, we're all the same on the inside, aren't we?" I feel angry when people assume that I must be lumped into some universal category, just like that.

But there is another kind of anger I need to address. So far I have been talking about reasons for anger in our personal lives. But if what feminist OSU writer Carol Hanish first said back in 1969 is true, namely, that "the personal is the political," then I can be angry, not just because of a physical or personal circumstance, but as a reaction to political and social situations. The idea that anger and social politics go together was made clear to me by the title of a book I found on my shelves this week. It's a collection of great editorial-page cartoons from newspapers around the world. It's called "Getting Angry Six Times a Week." The title says it clearly: the sorry situations in the world, both locally and far away, can indeed draw the sarcastic anger of cartoonists, and they can draw my own anger as well. Often more than a mere six times a week.

But the difference between personal anger and this more social anger is quite clear. If I say something to make you angry, or you say something to evoke my anger, we might be able to get over it in a short time.

A day or two, perhaps. Or a week. We'll talk about it. I'll sit down and we'll hash it through. But when I look out into the world, and see the state of inequality, injustice, violence, and systemic cruelty, the anger cannot be addressed by such personal means. I cannot have a little tête-à-tête with the powers that be in Darfur. I cannot sit down and hash things through with the whole legislature in Florida, which allows gay men to foster care for children with HIV all they want, but refuses to let them adopt "normal" children without HIV. I cannot sit down with the three wealthiest people in the world, whose combined fortune is greater than the gross domestic product of the 48 poorest countries on earth, and ask them if that bothers them in the least. I cannot have a reconciliatory chat with the 225 wealthiest individuals on earth, four percent of whose combined yearly income could pay for education, food, and health care for every single person on earth. I cannot call up the Columbus School Board and ten thousand families by myself and say: "I am angry that our city, the fifteenth largest city in the nation, has the fourth highest high school drop out rate in that nation. Fourth highest. I am furious. Can you help me to understand what is going on here?"

And the fact is, I cannot live enraged all the time. In fact, people who are angry all the time, and suppress it because there is so much of it, often crack at the slightest provocation. Road rage, homicides, snipers...all of these events are centered on a toxic anger build up from both personal and social sources of anger.

In the biblical story you heard this morning, Nehemiah is angry. He is angry because he has found out that a small group of folks are benefiting off the majority economically, forcing them to go into debt slavery by actually re-mortgaging their homes and living on borrowed money. He

does not see how any society can long survive such discrepancy of opportunity. So he expresses his anger clearly and with forthrightness.

But please note: he does not do it alone. He calls an assembly of concerned citizens to help make that statement with him. And according to the story, it works. There is a transformation, a promise by the self-anointed powers to work for the common good, instead of claiming everything for themselves, without regard for their brothers or sisters and their hungry children.

But I would like to suggest that it worked, not just because of the massed assembly, but because Nehemiah, as the text makes clear, “gave the matter a great deal of meditation.” You see, when people start to use phrases like “righteous” anger, I begin to get worried. Righteous? What? You have all the answers? You are perfect, godlike, and survey the whole world with omnipotent eyes?”

No, our great poet, Julia Vinograd, pushes the sober truth right in our faces with her fiercely clear writing. The world is not divided so cleanly between the pure righteous and the unrighteous, the human beings and the werewolves. The world is filled with human beings. Human beings who can do what Gandhi did, and do what Goebbels did, too, and do something in-between as well. A sense of righteousness in fact does not guarantee the rightness of any action. Goebbels, after all, felt self-righteous too, in killing the Jews and Roma people. As self-righteous as modern folks who know for sure they would never have cooperated with the Nazi regime, and would have righteously accepted death in the camps or before a firing squad. I say they don’t know that for sure. Only self-examination, contemplation, and long meditation gives anyone a provisional right to speak out like Nehemiah did. Shooting from the hip, because you think you are holy and your enemies are the werewolves is doing exactly what they are doing, in mirror image. They say you are not human. You say they are not human. This makes the mutual rage everlasting and permanent. God knows I’ve fallen into this trap many times during my years.

But Nehemiah, you see, had plenty to be angry about for other reasons. He had been the royal cup-bearer (that is, taster) for king Ataxerxes of Sushan and his queen. When the royals responded to his request to go back to his ancestral city of Jerusalem to supervise the reconstruction of the long fallen city walls, they were sending him back “home” yes, but to a home that was far less welcoming to him than even his place of captivity. For since the text insists he served the queen as well as the king, we know from the customs of that era that he must have been a eunuch, that is, a man who had been mutilated to make him safe to serve women. In Shushan, eunuchs could rise to high office. But in the culture of Jerusalem, eunuchs were not even allowed to worship in the main part of the temple. People thought they had strange voices and odd mannerisms. They appeared to be both male and female at the same time, which the culture found confusing, and thus (and unfortunately), worthy of rejection.

But through reflection on his own anger at being a captive, reflection on having been mutilated, and reflection on being forbidden to worship in the very temple he loved, he still was able to sort all that out from the social misery of a nation, where the poor had no power at all, losing more every day, and a few men had the whole nation in their pocketbook. The personal was the political for Nehemiah, but he fought the battles he could fight, and by appealing, not to the

inhumanity of his opponents, but precisely to their humanity. “Are you going to treat your own children like you treat our children?” he asked them. And invited to their full humanity, not being cast as monsters, they turned back on their ways, and supported the common good.

The latest BREAD meeting is called a Nehemiah assembly for that reason. To appeal to the humanity of everyone in question, not to denounce the humanity of anyone. To gather in assembled strength. The meditation, the research, has already been done by crews dedicated to the task. I thought you should know that before you show up on Monday the 8th.

And I thought you might benefit, as I have done, from thinking about anger as you approach that meeting, or even just tomorrow. And by the way, what is your style of anger?

Vision: A Prayer

I am not ashamed to be angry.

I am not ashamed to see things with my inner eye, which my outer eye has yet to see.

I am not ashamed to see a beautiful world:
a world of cooperation, education, and congratulation.

I am not ashamed to see a world
where scripture is a set of wings, not a hammer,
where religion's a celebration,
not a species of cruelty or fantasy.

I am not ashamed to see a world where the law makes things fair, not unfair, blesses, not damns.

I am not ashamed to see a world
where children are adored, not used to prove anything, or worse, used for their innocence.

I am not ashamed to see a world where people are strong and reasoned in their convictions, and moved by compassion more than culture.

And I am not ashamed of you, O Love. Amen.