

Embracing Anger
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You are a cook, a parent, and a river boat pilot, he says. Each of us has the seed of anger inside us, just as each of us has the seed of compassion inside us. That seed never disappears. That seed is the primary cause of our anger. Whatever the other person did is the secondary cause of our anger. Whatever injustice fuels our anger, that injustice is only a secondary cause. The primary cause of our anger is the anger seed found within.

This morning, we will pick up the thread of last Sunday's "When I'm 64" service on retirement income insecurity and weave that thread through the Occupy Wall Street protests and through Thich Nhat Hanh's teaching on anger. With all that thread weaving, what will we have at the end? At the end of the morning, I can guarantee that the yarn woven through retirement income insecurity, the Occupy Wall Street protests, and Buddhist teaching on anger will not shelter us from the elements. However, the weaving can be a verbal mandala: a pattern that represents the cosmos metaphysically or symbolically, a microcosm of the Universe from the human perspective.¹

We begin with anger and the cook. Dealing with our anger is like cooking potatoes, Thich Nhat Hanh says. "You put the potatoes in the pot, cover it, and put it on the fire. But even with a very high flame, if you turn the fire off after five minutes, the potatoes will not be cooked. You have to keep the fire burning for at least fifteen minutes in order for the potatoes to cook. After that, you open the lid, and you smell the wonderful aroma of cooked potatoes. After that, you open the lid, and you smell the wonderful aroma of cooked potatoes"

"Your anger is like that – it needs to be cooked. In the beginning it is raw. You cannot eat raw potatoes. Your anger is very difficult to enjoy, but if you know how to take care of it, to cook it, then the negative energy of your anger will become the positive energy of understanding and

¹ See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mandala>.

compassion.”² The stench of uncooked anger is a common smell. The wonderful aroma of cooked anger is not common.

When we reach the end of that metaphor, Thich Nhat Hanh introduces another. Our anger is our baby. “Embrace your anger with a lot of tenderness. Your anger is not your enemy, your anger is your baby . . . You accept your anger because you know you can take care of it; you can transform it into positive energy.” The key is to recognize your anger with mindfulness. To regard with mindfulness is not to fight.

Mindfulness has an energy which comforts the colicky anger baby. Our internal colicky anger baby fusses and squalls. Our internal colicky anger baby cannot yet talk, so we have to guess the nature of the upset. It is a mistake to avoid our colicky anger baby. That is likely to intensify the distress. We can learn to embrace it, recognize it, attend to it calmly and with tenderness. In our warm, strong arms, our colicky anger baby is likely to settle down and maybe even take a nap.

When we reach the end of the colicky anger baby metaphor, Thich Nhat Hanh offers one more: the riverboat pilot. Anger and suffering are closely linked. Being angry increases our own suffering and often leads to greater suffering by others. In fact, that is often our intention when we strike out in anger. “You are still standing on the shore of suffering and anger. Why don’t you leave this shore, and go to the other shore – the shore of non-anger, peace, and liberation? It’s much more pleasant there.”

“Why do you have to spend several hours, one evening, or even days suffering in anger? There is a boat you can use to cross very quickly to the other shore. That boat is the practice of returning to ourselves, through mindful breathing, so that we can look deeply at our suffering, anger, and depression and smile at them. Doing this, we overcome our pain and cross over to the other shore.”³

² *Anger: Wisdom for Cooling the Flames*, Thich Nhat Hanh, Riverhead Books, New York, 2001, p. 29.

³ Page 112.

One reason we do not cross from the shore of anger to the opposite shore more quickly is that we actually like it quite a bit right where we are. To feel angry is to feel alive. Sometimes our sensibilities are so dulled by routine or overscheduling that it takes strong emotion to feel anything at all. Relying upon anger to extricate ourselves from emotional doldrums, however, brings collateral damage. If anger is our default setting, our erratic behavior is off-putting to family, friends, colleagues, and strangers.

Another reason why we do not cross from the shore of anger to the non-anger shore more quickly is that we may see anger as a means to the end of social justice. African American Frederick Douglass summarized this view in “The Limits of Tyrants”:⁴

“Those who profess to favor freedom, and yet deprecate agitation, are people who want crops without plowing up the ground. They want rain without thunder and lightning; they want the ocean without the awful roar of the waters. This struggle may be a moral one; or it may be both moral and physical, but it must be a struggle. Power concedes nothing without a demand; it never did and it never will. Find out what people will submit to, and you have found out the exact amount of injustice which will be imposed upon them. The limits of tyrants are prescribed by the endurance of those whom they oppress.”

Consider the anger fueling the Occupy Wall Street movement. Will the increasing gap between wealthy people and wealthy corporations and the rest of us change without angry protest? Consider the increasing insecurity of retirement income in this country, a subject detailed in economist Teresa Ghilarducci’s book *When I’m 64: The Plot Against Pensions and the Plan to Save Them*.

People that do not have defined benefit pensions are often angry at those who do. A defined benefit pension provides retirement income that arrives each month regardless of stock market gyrations or real estate sinkholes. There are more defined benefit pension plans among public sector workers than among private sector workers. Workers are divided against other workers, and meanwhile the wealthier accumulate greater wealth.

⁴ Reading #579 in *Singing the Living Tradition* hymnal

The answer to retirement income insecurity is not for workers to work longer, unless they really truly want to do so. Working longer out of necessity is a hardship. Civilized societies enable people to retire, Teresa Ghilarducci argues. Compared to other countries, the United States has done well to establish Social Security as guaranteed retirement income for most workers (and spouses or former spouses of workers).

In addition and surprisingly, the flexible retirement age in the U.S. has enabled workers of every socioeconomic class to end up with roughly the same number of years of retirement leisure. Those in poor health tend to retire earlier than those in good health. They tend to die earlier but end up having about the same number of years of retirement leisure as those in good health, who tend to retire at a later age and to live longer.

Another positive aspect about retirement in the United States is that retirement income comes from a combination of sources, not from a single source. Retirement income comes from Social Security, from company pensions or 401(k)-type plans, from work earnings, from personal savings, and from income from “kinship and community.” Regarding retirement income insecurity, we are worried about the wrong problem. We are too worried about Social Security and not worried enough about the shift from defined benefit pensions to 401(k) defined contribution retirement plans.⁵

Some economists and policy makers think of defined benefit pensions as dinosaurs. If defined benefit pension plans are dinosaurs, they failed to adapt to a new environment (an environment in which employee loyalty did not matter much). According to this view, defined benefit pensions are going extinct because there is no reason to reward loyalty. After all, baby-boom workers are abundant. In a globalized economy, workers are abundant everywhere.

⁵ See . “A defined benefit (DB) pension plan credits every year of service with a certain percentage of salary earned, which is usually some average of the salary over the final years on the job . . . In a defined contribution (DC) plan, the employee and most employers pay a defined amount into the employee’s individual retirement account. Whatever the account accumulates and earns on its investments is what is available.”⁵

“I once agreed with this view [that defined benefit pensions are dinosaurs],” writes Teresa Ghilarducci. “But I have come to appreciate, in the face of mounting evidence, that there are other factors explaining the decline of DB plans aside from shifting labor relations caused by a change in the kinds of things produced in the economy, like services rather than manufactured goods.”⁶ “Defined benefit plans seem more like panda bears than dinosaurs, in the respect that pandas are creatures that are going extinct because powerful forces are destroying their habitat.”

“Modern day corporations managed their pensions badly, and in the face of a string of bad luck, bad law, and bad vision, they have permitted their defined benefit plans to collapse.” By the way, she will be in Riverside on Wednesday evening, November 9, sponsored by the Inland Empire Sponsoring Committee, broad-based organizing network. Look for a flyer on the green table.

Defined benefit plans dominate the public sector. Many of us who do not work in the public sector have pension envy. Do you know what? We can get over it. When we were children, we learned not to destroy the toys belonging to other children just because it did not belong to us. We can have the backbone to resist destroying public sector pensions just because they do not belong to us. It is a matter of enlightened self interest: As taxpayers, we benefit from others having enough income to keep out of crippling debt, to maintain their apartments or houses, and to buy food and clothes and entertainment.

What should we do? We should fight to preserve defined benefit pensions for anyone who has them. Resist attempts to shift defined benefit pensions to 401(k) plans. If we already have a 401(k)-type plan, we should not take loans from the account, we should not cash it in when we change jobs. Upon retirement, we should not take a lump sum settlement, if at all possible, opting instead for guaranteed monthly payments. We should save at least 5% of our income for retirement.

I conclude by returning to Thich Nhat Hanh’s metaphor of anger as a baby that needs recognition and attention so that the anger baby can return to the ever-present anger seed inside us. In

⁶ Page 91.

contrast to Thich Nhat Hanh, I believe that we need to allow the anger baby to grow up within us. We need to recognize our inner anger baby going through the “terrible two’s.” We need to recognize our inner anger baby growing into a teen-ager. I am somewhat anxious to share my perspective on the Occupy Wall Street and Occupy Everywhere protestors, but I trust you to take it in perspective. It seems to me that the Occupy protestors are anger teenagers – energetic, loud, prone to black and white thinking.

We were all teenagers once. Feelings about our own teenage years are likely to be stirred up by the Occupy protestors. Just as we can recognize our inner anger baby, we can recognize and parent our inner anger teenager. The real challenge, the religious challenge, is to parent our anger teenager into adulthood. What does that look like? When we can relate to our anger as one adult to another, now *there* is a force to be reckoned with.

Mature anger speaks in the language of diplomacy, negotiation, and compromise. Diplomacy, negotiation, and compromise are not synonyms for surrender, though teenagers beg to differ.

Our inner anger *adult* (not the anger baby) has a calibrated emotional life. Our responses are proportional to what bothers us. Emotional triggers have been moved from unconsciousness to consciousness. Participation in congregational life can help us calibrate our emotions. Emotions are instruments of connection. They must be calibrated. Anything used as an instrument must be calibrated. We can experience what peacefulness feels like. We can experience what anger feels like. Those are acts of calibration. We can practice diplomacy, negotiation, and compromise.

For those who do not resonate with the language of calibration, you may prefer the language of an emotional palette. Participation in congregational life can help change monochrome colors of our emotional life to a rainbow palette of colors. Participation in congregational life can deepen colors from washed out pastels to brilliantly saturated emotional tones. Diplomacy, negotiation, and compromise are beautiful in ways that our inner anger baby will never comprehend.

May we attend to our anger, nurturing its development from infancy to adulthood. May we cherish emotional life – our own and that of others. May it be so!