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## Holy Anger: Passion of the Heart

**BY TROY WOYTEK, CAMPUS MINISTER**

*Merciful and gracious is the Lord,  
Slow to anger, abounding in kindness.  
God does not always rebuke,  
nurses no lasting anger.  
-Psalm 103*

I have been noticing lately that our world is really angry, and in particular our country. As I take note of the violence, social and political polarization, and protests in our country and around the world, all fueled by anger, I can't help but wonder what does our faith have to say about anger?

The Hebrew Scriptures provide many examples of God's anger, such as in Judges 2:14, "the anger of the Lord flared up against Israel, and he delivered them over to plunderers." The prophets are often depicted as angry in their challenges to authority and the nation of Israel such as in Jeremiah 7:20. The New Testament displays the anger of Jesus in many of his rebukes against the Pharisees

### Stirring the Pot

Has something made you angry lately?  
When is the last time you admitted to  
being angry?  
Are you afraid of being angry?

and those he judged to be hypocrites such as in Luke 6:42, Matthew 7:5, and Luke 13:14. Who can forget the passage where Jesus turns over the tables of the moneychangers in the temple (Mt 21:12). So what does all this say about anger?

When we read these passages we can conclude that our God is passionate about his relationship with humanity that his servants, the prophets, are passionate about the salvation of their fellow countrymen, and that Jesus is passionate about the love that is required to restore the kingdom of God. The good news about anger that we can deduce from scripture is that anger is a sign of care, whether that be for ourselves or others. When I think about anger like that, it can actually make me hopeful that there is so much anger in the world. But it isn't passion that makes me worried about the anger I see in our world as of late. There is another aspect of anger that seems to be missing in much of the anger we see in our world.



### Compassionate Anger

If we really examine the anger we read about in scripture in most cases we will see that anger is accompanied by compassion. As often as we read about an "angry God" we read about a merciful and loving God as in Psalm 103 cited above. Compassion tempers anger to a level that makes the anger productive. I'm not talking about eliminating the anger, but using the anger for good.

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An analogy used in Evelyn Eaton Whitehead and James D. Whitehead's book *Transforming Our Painful Emotions* explains this concept well.

*"We can act temperately in the midst of anger - moderating our rage and focusing its energy effectively. In metallurgy, "to temper" means to refine metal until it is both strong and flexible. A well tempered piece of steel suits both a battle sword and a construction site. Our well tempered anger, too, both protects and builds up." (pg. 73-74)*

Anger is a statement of relationship. God is angry at times with humanity in the Bible because he is in relationship with humanity. He cares dearly for humans and wants what is best for humanity. No matter how angry God gets it never takes him out of relationship with humanity. The same can be said of Jesus; his moments of anger never cut off relationship, but intend to build up relationship through a greater understanding of love. This type of anger allows Jesus to express his anger without ever taking away the dignity of the person he is expressing his anger to. Compassion makes us realize that other people are indeed human beings and they have dignity and are worthy of being treated with dignity, which is to say with respect and love. Anger does not give us an excuse to take someone's dignity away, even if we feel our dignity has been taken away. Anger that takes away someone's dignity is the type of anger that is considered a "deadly sin". That is the anger St. Paul instructs us to avoid in his Letter to the Ephesians,

***"Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun set on your anger, and do not leave room for the devil." (Eph. 4:26-27)***

When we take someone's dignity away through our expression of anger we create disconnect in the relationship, which is antithetical to the purpose of anger. Instead of building up relationship and creating greater connection our anger un-tempered creates greater tension and even more anger.

## Misguided Anger

### Example #1

There are two examples of this type of anger that I would like to use to demonstrate anger without compassion. September 11th, 2012 marked the 11th anniversary of the terrorist attack on the U.S. in 2001. In the aftermath our nation was angry, and rightly so. People not only wanted to find out who was responsible and bring them to justice many sought out revenge. It was indeed a tragic moment in the history of our country, thousands of innocent civilians killed in an act of terrorism. When it became clear that the source of the terrorism was an extremist Islamic group called al-Qaeda the target of America's anger at times became misguided. Many Muslims who had nothing to do with al-Qaeda or

terrorism, in our country and around the world were the target of hate crimes, discrimination, and violence. Still to this day there is a growing suspicion about Muslims in our country and their supposed connection to terrorism, even though the majority of all Muslims are peaceful and denounce terrorism just as most Christians do. Our nation was justifiably angry because of an unjust action of terrorism, however out of that anger came a hatred for followers of the same religion that these terrorists happened to be a part of. This was and is an expression of anger not tempered by compassion.

### Example #2

This next example highlights the political polarization that has been fueled by anger and has been especially highlighted in an election year. Two years ago the St. Louis Post Dispatch published an editorial on Thursday, August 12th, 2010 that highlights how people are expressing their anger in our country without compassion. In many ways, I think this article foreshadowed the destructive nature of our country's angry rhetoric in politics that has been so prevalent in the 2012 election season. The article talked about the Tea Party's movement to oppose everything the Obama



administration does, whether it is for the good of the country or not. Without taking any political sides, I think this article (written by a Republican) touches on something that is very true about a growing polarization in our country. The point of the article is that anger has driven groups of people within our country, **on both sides of the political aisle**, to a point that no longer cares about relationship or growth, much less sees their opponent as anything more than enemy. Blake Ashby writes,

*"It used to be that when a president was elected you supported him and hoped he did a good job for our country. You respected the right of the majority to choose the president and afforded that president the opportunity to lead. I don't doubt that the Tea Partiers love our country. But I wish they would take a step back from their anger and realize it is not just the president of the United States they are undermining. It is the institution of democracy."*

The Whiteheads comment on how this type of anger tears down the very systems that are designed to promote healthy discourse fueled by anger.

*"Embedded in the notion of a loyal opposition is the virtue of civility: the strength of combining antagonism with respect, of disagreeing without degrading our opponent. When*

*antagonists employ bitter invective and accuse one another of the worst motives, they erode the line between anger and hatred, and vindication becomes vengeance. Then the ordinary conflicts and unavoidable agony of social life become deadly." (pg. 74-75)*

Civility and respect are rooted in the ability to compassionately see the human dignity in each person, no matter if you disagree with them or not. We may be angered by something someone has said or done but our response will be more Christ like if we direct our anger toward correcting injustices than plotting vengeance.

### Step 1: Honoring Anger

My hope is to conclude this article with some ways to model our anger after the holy anger described in scripture. Evelyn and James Whitehead's answer to the question of how to befriend anger is to do three things: "we honor it, then we evaluate it, then we tap its energy to help us act positively for change (pg. 51)."

The first step of honoring our anger is basically recognizing that we are in fact angry and that is ok. In the examples I used above there is nothing wrong with the fact that the people involved were angry. Anger is an emotion given as a gift to us by God to create greater connection and to right the injustices in our world. In fact, often times our anger is rooted in some sort of injustice that we perceive, whether it be a feeling that we or someone else has been treated unjustly or our perception that someone else has acted unjustly. To work for justice is indeed a virtue and much of the good in this world is motivated by the desire to fulfill or restore justice, but our perception of justice may not always be accurate.

### Step 2: Evaluating Anger

Where the people went wrong in the examples I used was in step two of the Whitehead's model. Evaluating our anger is a humbling process that makes us really look at why we are angry instead of just reacting.

*"Anger carries a moral claim: a wrong has been done that should be set right. This claim is not always accurate. Our immediate feelings may mislead us, and conclusions we rush to in anger must be revised later, when a calmer mood prevails..." (Whitehead, pg. 43)*

In considering the reasons for why you are angry you are forced to analyze the situation in a way that makes you consider the intentions of the person who upset you, what other factors played into you being angry, and what injustice was done that needs to be fixed. This type of evaluation is often times best done with the assistance of community. We can convince ourselves of just about anything and when we have been "wronged" it is quite easy to assume the blame belongs anywhere but ourselves. If the point is to refine our anger then it is good practice to consult someone before we act. Just by asking these questions and going through this process a person is already tempering their anger to a place of refinement that can actually be useful.

### Step 3: Taking Action

Finally, anger should always move us toward an action that makes change possible. That last part is crucial to

transforming anger; **making change possible**. This is another part that each of the two examples I used above did not execute well. In both situations an action was taken, however the action taken did not make positive change very possible. Anger that is expressed without compassion and thus therefore un-tempered is expressed in ways that demean others, employ violence, and create hostility. When you express anger in those ways it does not make change very possible. Instead it creates greater tension and even more anger. Anger that moves toward some concrete change is much more useful and healthy. In addition, when you consider actions that facilitate positive change you are more likely to recognize the dignity in each of the persons involved and see them as neighbor rather than as enemy. And when we see others as neighbor, even those who oppose us and make us angry, our emotional responses move us toward relationship rather than division.

### The X Factor

If there is one thing that is key to making this whole process of compassionate anger work it is the virtue of forgiveness. Without forgiveness we "let the sun set on our anger" and in harboring anger we are more likely to act without compassion. The anger makes us bitter rather than better and as a result we look to make someone the target of our anger rather than a partner in our anger. What I mean by "partner" is that our anger should never be a "hit & run" type of experience leaving someone at the scene of the crime wondering what just happened. Instead, partnership in anger means communicating to someone(s) how or why relationship has been disrupted and working with that person(s), through forgiveness, to restore right relationship. No matter how angry we are everyone is deserving of forgiveness and forgiveness demands restoring right relationship just as we read in Matthew's Gospel,

**"BUT I SAY TO YOU, WHOEVER IS ANGRY WITH HIS BROTHER WILL BE LIABLE TO JUDGMENT... THEREFORE, IF YOU BRING YOUR GIFT TO THE ALTAR, AND THERE RECALL THAT YOUR BROTHER HAS ANYTHING AGAINST YOU, LEAVE YOUR GIFT THERE AT THE ALTAR, GO FIRST AND BE RECONCILED WITH YOUR BROTHER, AND THEN COME AND OFFER YOUR GIFT."**

### Question Box

- 1) How can my anger be used for good in either building relationships or helping fix injustices?**
- 2) How do I resolve conflicts with partnership in mind rather than division?**
- 3) What is God saying to me in that place of anger targeted at a person or thing?**

Sources cited:

-Evelyn Eaton Whitehead & James D. Whitehead, *Transforming Our Painful Emotions*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY, 2010.

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