

Anger towards God

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“It goes without saying, I believe, that if we understood ourselves better, we would damage ourselves less. But the barrier between oneself and one’s knowledge of oneself is high indeed. There are so many things one would rather not know! We become social creatures because we cannot live any other way. But in order to become social, there are a great many other things that we must not become, and we are frightened, all of us, of these forces within us that perpetually menace our precarious security. Yet the forces are there: we cannot will them away. All we can do is learn to live with them. And we cannot learn this unless we are willing to tell the truth about ourselves, and the truth about us is always at variance with what we wish to be. The human effort is to bring these two realities into a relationship resembling reconciliation.” – James Baldwin in “The Creative Process,” 1962

These words, like so many of James Baldwin’s writings, pluck your heart and then remind you of the interior work that is uniquely yours to pursue. He issues a summons for self-examination and provides the heuristic lens by which to do it recognizing our proclivity to skew the findings: “tell the truth... [which] is always at variance with what we wish to be.” As a hospital chaplain I serve as a spiritual and emotional guide to the truth-telling of patients, families, and staff. In the process of listening to persons from all walks of life that are either hospitalized themselves or witnesses for their beloved I’m often privileged to catch aha moments and glimpses of revelation.

I can recall being with a patient’s son, who was in his mid-thirties, as he cried profusely concerning his father’s heart attack and ensuing critical condition. Later he told me privately that it wasn’t until that very moment as his dad’s life hung in the balance that he realized he still loved him. He went on to share that he’d harbored anger and resentment towards his father for twenty plus years because of his infidelity to his mom. With blood-shot eyes, he said his mom forgave him but he could not; that is, until then. This is but one of several stories I could share that speaks to the forces within that threaten to disrupt our precious personal mythologies. I think we all have them. And these mythologies are important because they shape our perceptions and our default way of being in the world. In the spirit of disclosure, it was somewhat painful but also liberating to discover that my automatic response to stress, crisis, and heart-ache is usually to get busy and keep myself stimulated—watch a movie, catch a play, call a friend, eat out, read a book, take an aimless drive even with these high gas prices!—anything to avoid sitting with the pain, the dysfunction, the dis-ease of spirit. Similar to the patient’s son, through CPE and a bevy of great colleagues, I continue to work towards that prayer “O God, help me to believe the truth about myself no matter how beautiful it is.” And the fact that life is tragic at times contributes to its beauty.

For whatever reason, it remains a difficult task for us to admit those deeper impulses and passions; chief among them is anger. More specifically anger directed

towards God. Anger remains a taboo subject unless one is speaking about righteous indignation or prophetic discontent at some injustice or wrongdoing. But often many feel that it is downright blasphemous to have feelings of anger towards the divine. By definition, anger can be defined as a strong feeling of displeasure and belligerence aroused by a wrong. It is generally frowned upon; Albert Einstein along with the sage of Ecclesiastes warns that “anger dwells only in the bosom of fools” and the Buddha stated that “you will not be punished for your anger, you will be punished by your anger.” The dominant thread being that anger is not an emotion or experience that should be tolerated let alone sought after in the same way we pursue happiness. Rather the embedded cultural and religious ethos is often that one should resist anger at all costs and if one happens to be in the throes of it, by all means: repent! So, when one adds the dimension of divinity into the equation the waters become even muddier.

I raise the issue of anger towards God based upon my observations in the hospital coupled with its unacknowledged impact on ministers. Beginning first with patients in the hospital who often mention their religious affiliation but then an interesting phenomenon occurs. They will confide these underlying questions, doubts, and anger towards God in my presence but the minute their pastor, rabbi, imam, or zealous family member enters the room the conversation shifts. It’s as if one loses face or risks being seen negatively to even voice such utterances. But those feelings are definitely there; ever present and ever nagging. “God I really can’t stand you!” “It seems so unfair, how could you let my husband develop this terminal illness?” “If God is real, why so much pain and suffering” While I’m well-versed in myriad Scriptures and theological sayings that can quickly lead one to comfort, hope, and joy in the morning, among others, I think its paramount to sit with the feelings and learn some lessons from the foot of the Cross, so to speak.

In addition to the people we serve and meet who may feel anger towards the divine we, as ministers, also experience the same thing. Perhaps it creates a tension for some to own these sentiments but the force is still there. And the flip-side of anger is usually sorrow or grief, in some capacity. Speaking about mystery of divine pathos and anger Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel in his classic, *The Prophets*, states that “God’s concern is the prerequisite and source of his His anger.” If the inverse is true, then our anger towards God is also rooted in a deep concern. As ministers who’ve been set apart to be heralds and prophets to and with the people we may get swept away by platitudes such as “God is good all the time” when in actuality we don’t really believe it...at least not in certain moments. And even if we do profess it earnestly our lived realities paint another picture. Lack of self-care, unexpressed bitterness that takes residence in our bodies, the existential sicknesses unto death, self-sabotage—so many ways that we don’t embody the goodness of God. Terrie Williams’ book entitled *Black Pain: It Just Looks Like We’re Not Hurting* develops the point further and I especially appreciate her subtitle. We just look like we’re not hurting and we look like all is well. I can’t neglect W.E.B. DuBois’ analysis which still holds true of the peculiar role and authority that black preachers maintain, whether wanted or not, along with all religious leaders that adds pressure to foster and sustain a persona of piety and sagacity. And there’s nothing innately wrong with that benchmark but I submit that a Baldwin ethos may be “the more excellent way.”

How might our pastoral care, preaching, teaching, and administration shift if we allowed more room for our inner menaces, like anger, to break forth? I love Rainer Maria

Rilke's advice on feelings in his ninth letter in *Letters to a Young Poet*, Rilke speaks about doubt but substitute anger and the same is true, he says:

And your doubt can become a good quality if you train it. It must become knowing, it must become criticism. Ask it, whenever it wants to spoil something for you, why something is ugly, demand proofs from it, test it, and you will find it perhaps bewildered and embarrassed, perhaps also protesting. But don't give in, insist on arguments, and act in this way, attentive and persistent, every single time, and the day will come when instead of being a destroyer, it will become one of your best workers - perhaps the most intelligent of all the ones that are building your life.

In a similar vein I encourage the usefulness and good quality that anger towards God can serve as we minister to others and allow ourselves to be ministered to.