

Cold Anger

A Sermon by Dan Lillie, Ministerial Intern

First Unitarian Church of Albuquerque

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Angela's Message

Three weeks ago, Angela spoke about resistance. To quote from her sermon, she said, "We are in for a long haul, which means we cannot prepare ourselves as though it were a quick campaign. Sadness, anger, and fear will only carry us so far. The strength that sustains this kind of resistance comes from the heart and the spirit. So let us make our homes, for now, in this chaos. Allow yourself to be in harmony with uncertainty, so that when you are called to action, you will not be already exhausted. Breathe; feed your body and spirit; get centered and give thanks for what is good and beautiful; remember that we are made for play and joy as well as striving; surround yourself with friends."¹

Evil is not easily defeated. Although it can be held at bay by cultivating these precious moments of joy, goodness and beauty, the darkness of injustice, oppression, and despair lie just beyond our purview, waiting to creep back in like shadows that stretch and grow and loom larger as the sun drops toward the horizon.

Rev. Rebecca Parker writes, "Calmness in the face of evil comes to those who, rather than being frantic to purge it, concentrate their attention on recognizing and resisting its habits."² And while we are attentively learning to recognize the habits of evil so that we can responsibly resist them, Angela reminds us that we sometimes need to make our home in the chaos, to be in harmony with uncertainty.

But this is easier said than done: generally, we are not comfortable with instability and ambiguity. We fear the unknown. In the gap between what is and what is possible, our minds can go to some very dark places. Indeed, if we allow ourselves, we can live in a place neither real nor impossible, where all of our

¹ "Resistance" by Rev. Angela Herrera, delivered on November 20, 2016 at First Unitarian Church of Albuquerque.

² *A House for Hope: The Promise of Progressive Religion for the Twenty-first Century* by John Buehrens and Rebecca Ann Parker, p. 69.

worst fears are playing out. If imagining a worst-case scenario paralyzes us, then it is more likely to happen, because we have given up our agency, our autonomy, our power. The power to act, especially in our own self-interest, is not just a human right (for rights can be denied); it is a human ability. To exercise our right and ability to power is to do, to act, to live. Community organizer Saul Alinsky said, "Power is the very essence, the dynamo of life. It is the power of the heart pumping blood and sustaining life in the body. It is the power of active citizen participation, pulsing upward, providing a unified strength for a common purpose."³

So, the problem of instability and ambiguity is that it makes us feel powerless. And if power is the essence of life, then a lack of power can begin to feel like a threat to our existence. It's no wonder that people who are regularly and systemically denied power might feel less than human. And it's also not surprising that people who are accustomed to having power resent the idea of letting any of it slip away, and are often willing to do anything to keep it.

Not knowing is scary. But if we can be honest with ourselves, and examine our fears to distinguish the possibilities from the realities, we don't have to waste energy slaying imaginary dragons and can focus our efforts on confronting the real ones.

My Friend, JLA (and Nadia)

I'd like to introduce you to my friend. Well, I don't know him personally, but I like his ideas so much that I consider him a friend. Does anyone else do that? Does anyone feel so connected to a poet, or a musician, or a thinker, or an author that you feel like you know them, and forget that they don't know you?

Funny side story: I actually ran into someone who wrote a book that I like very much and quote from often. She lives in Denver, and went to the seminary that I attended. In her book, she often makes reference to our shared school. Having these things in common made the feeling that I knew this woman even more pronounced. So when I ran into her in a coffee shop in Denver, I smiled and waved at her. "Hi Nadia!"

³ *Cold Anger: A Story of Faith and Power Politics* by Mary Beth Rogers, p. 45.

The confused look on her face quickly reminded me that I needed to introduce myself.

But I digress.

Back to my friend: this is Rev. James Luther Adams. In addition to being a Unitarian Minister and a social ethicist, he is one of our faith tradition's most prominent theologians. There are two ideas of his that stand out as personal favorites of mine:

The first is his definition of the divine. Throughout his writings, James Luther Adams repeatedly refers to God as "the divine community-forming power." I just love this. I think this sentiment resonates so deeply with me because it places the divine (the purest of the pure, the greatest of the great) squarely within the context of the beloved community. It makes the divine a product of relationality. And not between people and some ethereal or otherworldly being, but between people and people. Between one another. A community is a network, an interconnected web, of relationships; and it is community, built on relationships, that creates the divine. I like to think of God as the energy in the room that we create by being here together.

Author George Kimmich Beach (a friend of Adams who actually knew him) agrees with me. He writes, "'The divine community forming power' is Adams's simplest definition of God, and his most profound. It locates God's creativity in the formation and the healing of communal relationships and God's judgment in the exclusivity and betrayal of communities."⁴

And, not to be ignored in this simple and profound definition of God, is the word power. "The divine community forming power." And this is precisely why community building and community organizing is such important spiritual work: This is how power is created.

Power

Power often has a negative connotation, and it can certainly be misused. Lord Acton is famous for saying, "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts

⁴ *Transforming Liberalism: The Theology of James Luther Adams* by George Kimmich Beach, p. 191.

absolutely.” However, if we understand power as the ability to act in our own self-interest, then we can begin to see power as a resource. Often, the type of power that has negative associations around it is *power over*. This is not the kind of power we are looking to create.

The power we are looking to create together in community is not power over, but *power with*. Power with means that everyone who is affected by the outcome of a decision or action has a say in what that action is. It requires some general agreement on how we are going to be with one another. This is why covenant is so important in our faith tradition. By being a people, a community, built on covenant, we affirm that we seek power with, not power over.

Power is an important concept in Community Organizing. The original community organizer, Saul Alinsky, created the Industrial Areas Foundation, or IAF, in 1941 to train leaders how to organize their communities and empower them to affect positive change. One of Alinsky’s protégés, a man named Ed Chambers, uses slightly different terminology to describe the difference between power over and power with. He says, “The only purpose of our organization is to amass power – but we are not interested in brute power... we are about relational power... There is a difference between strength and bullying. Power can afford to be practical, flexible, wise, patient. Power can administer justice. When you have power you can afford to be generous. Power moves orderly; it doesn’t crush. The misuse of power sets the seed of its own destruction.”⁵

This is the kind of power that is created in beloved community. Relational power. Power that administers justice. Power that is generous, patient, and wise. It is the kind of power that helps us align our various self-interests and begin to move past the chaos of fear and uncertainty.

Five Smooth Stones

I mentioned that I have two favorite ideas of James Luther Adams. The first is his articulation of God as “the divine, community-forming power.” My other favorite

⁵ *Cold Anger: A Story of Faith and Power Politics* by Mary Beth Rogers, p. 48.

theological contribution of Adams is his *Five Smooth Stones of Liberalism*.⁶ The liberalism he is talking specifically about is Religious Liberalism. As Unitarian Universalists, we belong to a liberal religion; which means, his *Five Smooth Stones* applies to us.

Each of the Five Stones, or principles, could be an entire sermon topic of its own, but I'll give you the short version:

- 1) Number one: "Religious liberalism depends on the principle that 'revelation' is continuous." This one means that we are constantly learning new truths.
- 2) Number two: "All relations between persons ought ideally to rest on mutual, free consent and not on coercion." Here's another reference to our covenantal nature. This smooth stone means that we freely choose to be in relationship with one another.
- 3) Number three: "Religious liberalism affirms the moral obligation to direct one's effort toward the establishment of a just and loving community." This one means that we work for justice, and we do it together.
- 4) Number four: "We deny the immaculate conception of virtue and affirm the necessity of social incarnation." This one means that we do, in fact, have agency. We cannot sit idly by and wait for a better world. If there is to be goodness and justice, we must act to make them so.
- 5) Number five: "Liberalism holds that the resources (divine and human) that are available for the achievement of meaningful change justify an attitude of ultimate optimism." This one means that we should find hope in the fact that we have what we need to improve the world.

⁶ All excerpts and quotes about the *Five Smooth Stones of Liberalism* come from "Guiding Principles for a Free Faith" by James Luther Adams in *On Being: Selected Essays in Religion and Society*, edited by Max Stackhouse, p. 12-20.

It is this fifth stone that I am particularly interested in. It is not a promise that the world will get better, but it is an assurance that we have all that is necessary to do the work. And it gives us permission to feel good about doing good.

Resources

So, what are these resources that are available for the achievement of meaningful change?

Angela mentioned some of them:

We find strength in the nourishment of our bodies and our spirits.

Gratitude for the goodness and joy in our lives.

Appreciation of the beauty that surrounds us.

We have friends, relationships, and the beloved community.

We have compassion, empathy, and love.

And we have anger.

Injustice at Taco Cabana

I'm going to tell you a story about a time I got angry. On a quest for a late-night snack one night, I ended up at a Taco Cabana. I approached the counter and placed my order. Three dollars and some change for two tacos and a drink. What a deal!

I handed the cashier a ten-dollar bill to pay for my meal. When I received a dollar and some coins back as change, I politely pointed out to the cashier that she had forgotten to include the five-dollar bill that would account for proper change for the ten I paid with.

"No, you paid with a five," she said.

"No, I paid with a ten," I replied. "You own me five more dollars."

We repeated this exchange a few times as the line grew longer behind me.

“I’m not moving until you give me my change,” I said.

“I’ll go to the back and count my drawer. If it is over by five dollars, I’ll give you the five,” she said.

“Go ahead, I’ll wait.” At last, I would be proven correct!

I waited ten minutes at the front of a line of frustrated people for the cashier to return. I was ready for an apology and a five-dollar bill, and so the smug look on her face as she approached the counter confused me.

“My drawer was right, so I don’t owe you anything,” she said.

“I want to speak to your manager,” I said; to which she replied, “I am the manager.”

[PAUSE]

Hot Anger vs Cold Anger

There are two kinds of anger: Hot anger and cold anger. The problem with hot anger is that it is reactive; we are often quick to respond to anything that makes our blood boil. See? many metaphors for anger are hot: makes my blood boil, hot under the collar, seeing red, more heat than light, blowing off steam; there seems to be a strong correlation between temper and temperature.

But there is also cold anger.

I’m a basketball player. Anyone who has been to a game or seen one on TV has probably seen the big wavy noodles that look like foam pool toys that opposing fans wave when a player is trying to shoot free throws. Some fans will yell. It’s not uncommon for someone to sound an air horn at just as the shooter is about to release the ball. Really good free throw shooters find a way to not let the crowd’s methods of distraction affect their shot. Players who can do this in even the most tense situations, with the game on the line, are said to have “ice in their veins” referring to their ability to remain cool under pressure. Seemingly nothing can bother them, or take their focus off the task at hand. Nothing gets them worked up. Nothing makes them hot and reactive. They know how to remain cool, even cold; cold as ice.

What if we were as laser-focused on our justice work as these basketball players are on their free throws? What if we learned how to tune out all the distractions and derailments, and zero in on one particular task, with a specific and attainable desired outcome? What if we had ice in our veins as we carried out a well-thought and carefully crafted plan? This is the power of Cold Anger. While hot anger gets us to react in unplanned, unpredictable, and generally, unproductive ways, cold anger can motivate us to be controlled, calculated and incredibly effective. Cold anger is also sustainable in a way that hot anger is not; with hot anger, we often “burn out” from trying to do too much, or being so reactive and operating out of control leaves us with nothing left to give...we reach the end of our fuse.

Taco Cabana, Continued

From time to time, I still go through the possible scenarios of what might have taken place in that back room where she counted her drawer:

Maybe her drawer had been off before my transaction, and my money made up the difference, so when she counted the drawer, it was “right” (because of my unintended contribution).

Perhaps she had intentionally stolen from me and was lying about it.

I suppose it’s possible that I was wrong, that I had actually considered paying with a ten, but changed my mind and opted for the five.

It may have been that she counted the drawer, found that I was correct, and she was either too ashamed or too proud to admit that she had made the error.

Only she knows what really happened in that back room. But when she came back out and declared that her drawer was right, I was angry. Hot Angry. Not only had I just been stolen from, I was being called a liar.

I had literally been shortchanged. I was angry at the injustice, and frustrated by my powerlessness.

I can only imagine how heightened these feelings of injustice and powerlessness must be when the injustices are identity-based, like when women are shamed or not taken seriously for reporting sexual assault, or people of color who are denied housing, loans, or worst of all, when they are assumed to be guilty and dangerous

at traffic stops, and excessive force and violence is used against them, sometimes resulting in death.

These are far better reasons to get angry than losing five dollars. When we hear or experience these stories of injustice, we *should* get angry. But unlike my ineffective venting to the manager (who had absolutely no incentive to resolve the injustice), we should channel our anger, turn it from hot to cold, and use it as a reminder to keep going, to keep fighting effectively, and to keep doing the work of disrupting evil, despair, and injustice.

How?

We affirm life.

We celebrate the diversity and complexity of our intersecting identities.

We appreciate beauty and goodness.

We build relationships.

We invest in beloved community.

We build power with, not power over, and we use it to take effective action.

This afternoon, there will be an opportunity to learn strategies of how to do effective community organizing. I invite you to join me and the First Unitarian Core Organizing Team at an introduction to organizing put on by Albuquerque Interfaith. The style of broad-based, relational community organizing that they will be teaching about can be used to build relationships right here within the walls of our own congregation. We can also use these methods to build institutional relationships between our church and organizations in the greater Albuquerque community who are committed to doing the work of justice. Please go get some lunch after the service and join us right back here in the sanctuary at 1:30 pm.

And now let us join together in creating the divine community forming power by singing hymn #170 in your gray hymnals, *We Are a Gentle, Angry People*.