



## **“A is for Angry”**

From the message series *HALT: Hungry, Angry, Lonely, Tired*

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A number of years ago, I preached a message in which I shared a story about origami as a spiritual practice. A young man was using origami at a time of life when he was in transition, and he made one piece of origami for like 100 or 200 days in a row. It kind of saw him into a new phase of his life, a new part of his existence, and the next week someone came to WellSprings and gave me this. I thought it was a frog. Apparently it's a crane.

I don't keep a lot of things for five years, but I've kept this for five years. The point is, and why I keep it, it reminds me of your creativity. So I'm going to put our little friend, never named, right there to watch today. (He's gotten rather squished over five years as well.)

The reason I thought of this piece of origami this week is I regularly read a blogger named Rachel Held Evans. I don't know if some of you know of her. She is a woman who grew up in a very, very strict Evangelical trending toward Fundamentalist kind of household. She did something that you're not supposed to do if you're from that tradition, which is start to question. She started to not just question, but critique. Indeed she still very much calls herself a Christian. She is really trying to live out as Jesus of Nazareth invited people to live, and she has critiqued that tradition for its homophobia, for its sexism, for its treatment of women, for its treatment of a whole variety of people who are often treated as others, you know; not quite fully human in the way that they're treated. She writes with a great deal of humor as well, and she's from the town that Scopes Monkey Trial occurred in. You know, the first and not the final salvo in the ongoing battle between science and creationism, between literalistic kind of religion and a more expansive way of understanding our universe. So her first book has this wonderful title. It's called *Evolving in Monkey Town*. Love it. Great book.

She actually has quite a devoted following online because she's a wonderfully skilled writer. She's got great insights about the nature of her faith, and what I think are on-target critiques of certain kind of closed-minded and also closed-hearted religion. So, there are a lot of fans.

There are also a lot of detractors. She has people who, because she is questioning a certain variety of faith that is very important to people, and who tend to treat that faith as

something that should be entirely unquestioned, she has people who send her hate mail. She has people who leave her in her comment section on her blog sometimes not just, “Hey, I disagree with you,” but really vicious, angry kinds of feedback, and she says that being online regularly as she is, she has to develop a thick skin. I think any of us who are online, if we’ve ever voiced an opinion online, we’ve got to recognize other people are going to disagree with us. So being online for her means developing kind of a thick skin with criticism. At the same time she wants to develop this thick skin, she doesn’t want to armor her heart.

So she decided this year for Lent she would engage in a kind of peacemaking practice, and it’s origami. Maybe those of you in the very front row, if you squint, can see some of the words that are written on here. This is a piece of hate mail that she’s received that she made, I’m going to guess, a crane or a swan – I don’t know anything at all about origami – but if you can see it... I’m not going to read you the words up here, and if you’ve been here for a while, you know there are very few words that I will not say from this pulpit. But there are a few words on here that I will not say because they’re just that offensive. They’re that ugly; they’re that hateful.

So Rachel Held Evans takes pieces of this hate mail or comments that she’s gotten. She prints them out and makes little pieces of origami out of them as a practice so that she does not return hate for hate. Bitterness for bitterness. Exchange anger for anger. She says that sometimes when she’s making these little figurines of the origami she will read some of these words again and feel that her heart is opening. Sometimes tears will fall as she says she “prays with her hands” to live a different kind of life or a different expression of her faith than people who have been sending her these ugly mean-spirited and hateful words.

I love this expression that she has of working with the difficult emotion of anger, at times of rage. It’s an example of a phrase I heard many years ago called turning vinegar into honey. Most often it works the other way around. Wine turns into vinegar. Well, learning to transform our anger is – as a guy named Ron Leifer, who’s the head of the Ithaca Dharma Society and also a medical doctor, a psychiatrist – he says that, in fact, if we learn to work with our anger in a meaningful way, we will have the capacity of turning the vinegar of bitterness, of anger, into the sweetness of understanding of honey.

This is why HALT – Hungry, Angry, Lonely, Tired – learning to halt with these powerful states of being, particularly with anger, learning to stop. Learning to take a sacred pause gives us the capacity to transform difficult emotions like anger. Difficult physical states of being, like tiredness, like being hungry. Difficult emotions like loneliness, to learn to transform those things.

This is my basic assumption today: All of us know what it is like to be angry. Anyone here who’s never gotten angry? [*Someone jokes yes, laughter*] I know that not to be true.

So here’s the basic assumption: Anger is an energy. I first heard these words from a guy named Johnny Lydon. You might know him better as Johnny Rotten. He was the

lead singer of the Sex Pistols. Back in the '80s when I used to listen to bands that were hip back then and now make me feel like an old fart, one of the things that Johnny Lydon sang was, "*Anger is an energy*," and it is. Anger is an energy. Sometimes it's a very powerful energy. Sometimes it can even be a productive energy. It is natural, but very often anger is not helpful, at least the kind of anger that hangs around and won't be transformed because that kind of anger grows into a brittleness. It grows into bitterness. Grows into resentment. Grows into rage. Grows into a place where we find ourselves so often battling life, at war with life, at war with ourselves, at war with each other. And so to keep anger from becoming aggression, resentments or violence, it is important to learn to halt in the midst of our anger and to see what's really going on.

Last week I said, and it's absolutely true, that individuals and countries go to war over these four states of being, especially with anger. And by the way, anger-based religion is, as I understand it, the only form of religion that is actually bad for your health.

There's a guy named Dr. Andrew Newberg, who some of you might know who's in this area. He used to work at the University of Pennsylvania. Now he works at Jefferson, and he's a researcher, what's called a neuro-theologian. He takes a look at the neurology of belief; how we're hardwired for belief; what spiritual experience does to us; helps us, transforms us. He says in all of his studies, in his decades of years of taking a look at the brain on spirituality, there's only one form of religion that actually is physiologically, biologically bad for us. It's anger-based religion; religion in which we ascribe to God or to the universe itself attributes of rage, of wrath to use the traditional word.

I heard an example of this not too long ago. A guy named Mark Driscoll, who founded a very kind of creative spiritual community called Mars Hill in Seattle, Washington. He's a great communicator. The only problem, from my perspective, is what he communicates. He says for him Jesus is a mixed martial art fighter holding a sword in one hand with a skull and crossbones tattoo on his leg 'cause Mark Driscoll says he cannot worship a God who can't kick his ass. He has to worship power, worship anger. That kind of anger-based religion is not just, as we know, physiologically harmful; it is ethically harmful, morally harmful to our world.

Very often we encounter these kind of folks as Type A; the kind of folks who just come in and overwhelm the room with their anger or with their aggression. There's another style of dealing with anger that also is manifestly unhealthy for us. Not as much exposure to this one, but it's called Type D. You heard about Type D? Type D, *Time Magazine* has done stuff about it, *Newsweek Magazine*. Type D is Type Distress. The people who experience anger or conflict or difficult emotions, and just squelch it right down. They start to think that the minute they experience a difficult emotion, something must be objectively wrong, objectively disordered with them. So if being the Type A kind of person who deals with their anger isn't all that healthy, and being the Type D kind of person who deals with their anger in that way isn't all that healthy, well, that's exactly what HALT is about. It's about finding kinder, more wise ways to play what I think is a long game with our anger.

When I say a long game, I'm talking about learning some attributes that might be difficult to come by in our society, which is a society that is focused on – because of the wonderful parts of technology very often – about getting things quickly, about playing a short game, looking forward just a little bit in front of our face and saying, "I want it now."

I'm not sure, by the way, that this society that we're in is any angrier than any other society that's come before it. I'm actually somewhat convinced that actually we're less angry than societies who come before us have been. We just know a lot more about other people's anger.

But here's one of the things that's absolutely true, especially if you spend any time online like I do, is that there are a lot more flash-points. There are a lot more opportunities to get flamed or to be flamed by someone with whom we have a disagreement on line. There are a lot more triggers for our anger. I think it's very telling that the most well-known, most famous, most played video game right now is this little creature here, Angry Birds. I think I've played Angry Birds once, and in terms of video games, it's like the most innocent thing in the world. These birds fly through the air very slowly and seek to break apart these structures that hold pigs, who I think hold the birds' eggs. There's no bloodshed; there's no objective violence. I mean you can find so many worse things on line, but here's my only question about Angry Birds: When do they stop being angry? Do they just keep getting angry?

One of the teenagers who was at the first service came up and told me when the birds stop being angry. I think this is so telling. This is perfect. The birds get to the very end if you win all the levels, if you are a very skilled player, you get to the very end and you defeated all the enemies, and then the bird smiles. I think actually that's a perfect metaphor for our time, the way some people deal with anger. "I can stop being angry when I stop having enemies, when the world stops opposing me! When everything is just as I want, then I will no longer be angry." Welcome to never. That's just not the way the world is. The world is sometimes difficult.

In this short-game society, to learn to play a long game with our anger is to know that we can transform. We can turn vinegar into honey. But having a short fuse with our anger will not get us to the place of spiritual maturity or deepening. When I talk about understanding anger and working with anger in a meaningful way, I'm not talking about, as I've heard some people say, "Well, I was angry and I was in the moment when I was angry, which is why I screamed at you." I've had people say this to me. I don't think that is being in the moment. It's confusing this phrase that we talk about, "being in the moment" (knowing what's really here) with "being for the minute." Those are two different things, as other spiritual teachers have talked about – many more of us besides just me.

Here's the thing about being in the moment, whether it's the book like *The Power of Now* or any of the variety of other very popular titles that could largely go under the frame of contemplative spirituality. When we're being in the moment, we actually find that a paradox opens up. We allow ourselves to really be in the moment with whatever is going on. We can find that time and space can really open up for us. Things can be

a little bit more free, a little bit more easy. It is the exact opposite of the kind of being for the moment that says, "I have to get everything out right now, or I have to squelch everything down right now." Rather, truly being in the moment means opening the mind and opening the heart, and in mindful and kind and loving ways, being with difficult experiences like anger.

One of our core beliefs here at WellSprings is affirming the capacity that all of us have for abundance and joy. Those two things absolutely go together. The more we can affirm abundance, the more we can affirm that there's space and there's room for all of us, and there's space and there's room for us to live, and there's space and there's room for us to breathe, the more we will know the real presence of joy, joy which is not instantaneous pleasure, "I got to have it now," or instantaneously, "I've got to get rid of this difficult emotion right now." Joy is that deeper opening of the heart that allows us to really be connected to this life, and so the opposite of abundance and joy is scarcity and anger, 'cause when we treat our anger with scarcity, we think either we have to get rid of it with anger towards ourselves or we have to push it out towards another person. Willing to play the long game with our anger is more wise, a more skillful way of dealing with this difficult emotion.

I will cop to it. I am an overly emotional person. There is a lot of volatility within me emotionally. So the minute I recognize me as me, I recognize that I have some pretty strong moods. Now, for years the way I dealt with this was to drink it. I drank my anger, which at first both dulled, which is to say squelched, and then intensified, which is to say released, my anger. Neither of these ways were all effective for me. Figure that.

One of the things I've learned, especially in the seven and a half years since I've not been drinking, since I've been living sober, is to pay attention to the quality of the receiver, which is me, the one who receives anger, who experiences anger. I mean receiver in that sense of the old AM/FM dial. We're trying to dial it in and get the clearest signal, get the clearest frequency.

Sometimes when I experience anger because of something that someone has said to me or a piece of news that I read or hear, I try to think of that old joke that I remember when I lived in Southeast Florida, which except for hurricane season, is entirely true. Don't like the weather? Wait 15 minutes. Things change.

Very often, when I find myself getting angry, and really the stakes aren't all that high, it's actually because I'm hungry, lonely or tired. By learning to pause and halt with my anger in that moment, what I can do is say, "I'm going to give myself the capacity, time and space to change." And you know what? Eventually the anger isn't nearly as intense. Or it goes away. Then I find I can respond in a meaningful way to the person with whom I may have a disagreement. As the receiver changes, so can the anger change as well.

I try to remember another of those bands from the '80s that used to be really hip and aren't at all anymore, a band called Soul Asylum. I love this line. He said, "*I do believe anger is offset by sorrow. What you destroy today, you might regret tomorrow.*" That's about learning to halt with our anger. Learning to recognize that below anger are very

often emotions like sadness, which need attention. I do believe anger is offset up sorrow. What you destroy today, you might regret tomorrow. Acting unmindfully with anger tends to lead to more anger and escalation. I try to remember this in moments where I can respond mindfully to my anger, and it helps me set intention to play that long game to continue to listen to anger because you know what? Sometimes there are moments in all of our lives, and maybe we're in the midst of one right now, where the anger that we're experiencing, it does not change. The anger abides 'cause the anger is a signal, perhaps an alarm that has been tripped. It tells us something is awry; something has gone wrong.

Two big social recognizable examples of this where a lot of people, including myself, felt anger, one is, of course, the shootings in Newtown. Anger that our understanding of a certain freedom with guns and firearms so regularly in our society produces mass murders.

Another example: the gang rape and the murder of that woman on that bus in India. I mean, I don't know in the face of such atrocities what other expressions there could be. I mean there are others alongside of it, but that anger is justifiable in these places; that children aren't safe to go to school; that women are not safe to take a bus.

In these cases, to play the long game with our anger is to ask or question ourselves. Yes, the anger is telling us that something has been violated that is important, but what is being violated? When we can play the long game with our anger, we can locate the value that the anger is telling us is being injured.

This is the challenge, I think, for all of us when we're angry about things that really, really matter. Can we be in touch with our anger long enough that we may find the very shape and contour of our hearts? Which is to say what we really care about? Can we play the long game with anger long enough to reveal our anger as, in fact, a form of giving a damn? Of love? This is why it is so powerful to learn to halt with our anger to find out what is really going on in that moment.

So often in our society, we have stereotypes of the ways that people deal with anger. I think of two figures, two "persons," these two when I think of anger. I think of Spock. "Emotions? I don't have emotions." And then I think of Stuart Smalley, who has nothing *but* emotions.

I think both of these are false ways to deal with anger 'cause I know people who are highly analytical who have a deep capacity for anger, and I know people who are deeply emotional like myself – I'm so much more Stuart Smalley than Spock, by the way, but if you know me you know that already – who know that we can think about our anger as well, too.

The point is to be integrated. It's not just to be one thing or the other.

I want to share with you a couple different ways to understand what it's like to work with anger in mindful, meaningful, heart-full kinds of ways. It comes from the Center for Non-Violent Communication. I love their work.

They talk about the first way that we deal anger interpersonally as what we call conflict. The first is this – passive. The passive person is the person who when anger arises they're in the midst of conflict, immediately takes themselves out. The bullied person who starts to believe about themselves that there is nothing they can bring to the table, and so they just make themselves a ghost. The person who believes that have no rights or no means to be able to express what their feeling, and, of course, if there are the bullied, there are also bullies, which takes us to our second kind – the aggressive person. The in your face finger pointing, "You did this. You are the bad guy." The person who dominates the room with their anger and with their conflict, a form of violence. If passive is the form of violence to ourselves by having the inability to express they were angry or that there's conflict, the aggressive person externalizes their anger.

Now there's the third kind that I find always so interesting: the passive aggressive. Maybe we grew up in families in which this was the dominant style of anger. This is the person who appears to be passive – not to say anything. Not to make a peep, but the person who likes to whisper. "That SOB," behind their back, "I can't believe, goddammit, that they did that. How can they do this to me?"

So what they do, the passive aggressive person, is they say, "I can't handle Kim." Kim and I have no conflict now, not that I know of. "Kim, I'm pissed at you, but, Teresa, can you believe what Kim did? Can you believe what Kim did?" That's passive aggressive. By the way, another sign that you're being passive aggressive with conflict or anger is this: You use a lot of sarcasm. I know this one real well.

And then there's the fourth kind, which is truly non-violent communication. What they call assertive; the ability to say, "Here I am." Not, "You did this to me," and not squelching it down, but to say, "There's a conflict between us. Let's talk about it. Let's explore it together. Let's give each other that grace of time and space." This is, to borrow the phrase of a small group that I'm going to start next month, practicing loving-kindness in the fact of aggression so we don't do something that many of us joke about, but hopefully none of us have ever done, which is go postal. Right? I mean that's a joke for mammoth aggression, for rage externalized.

Now none of us have ever gone postal, hopefully, in this room. But what many of us are more likely to do is go global with our anger and with conflict. Global, which says if we internalize it, because I feel anger and I'm not allowed to feel anger, there must be something absolutely wrong with me. Not just I'm feeling something wrong, but I must be wrong.

To the person who externalizes that anger when we go global, what we say to that person is, "You are the worst person I could ever imagine. There is nothing right with you. There is only something wrong with you." That's when we go global and we ascribe to another person or to ourselves the most base motives. It is said that anger

turned inward towards the self becomes depression, becomes literally loathing ourselves. Externalized it becomes violence or aggression.

So that's one of the reasons I love what Jon Stewart said a few years ago. He put it on a t-shirt. I still have to get the t-shirt. I hope they still make it:

*I may disagree with you, but I'm pretty sure you're not Hitler.*

To be able to say that is to say, "Yeah. I disagree with you, but I'm not going to go global on your ass. I'm not going to ascribe the worst motives to you." It is to pull back from that brink that all of us might face, and I think we see it all the time in our political life, where what is most important to us, because I think scarcity is kind of the operating system that's going on, is that we just have to keep yelling, keep saying, keep speaking, and not leave room for real communication, the root word of which is communion, which allows space for both of us.

I think this is the key thing that we can check in with when we're feeling conflict with another person or conflict with ourselves. Do we want to speak only or do we want to listen? Listen to ourselves, listen to the other person, listen to other people?

It's like politicians and preachers always say this when they talk about men who father children, but won't commit to raising them. They say, "Any guy can make a baby, but it takes a man to raise one." Well, that kind of little line to the side, I think the same principle that applies with conflict. Just about anyone can find a means of self-expression, but in the midst of anger do we really want to communicate? Do we really want an open, abundant space to listen? To hear? Knowing that the disagreement still might continue, but not to immediately dismiss anger and not to immediately condemn because of anger, but instead, to inquire?

I think this is a real soul strength practice because so many other expressions of strength in our society are merely about the manifestation of ego: Of making myself look good, of making myself feel good immediately, sometimes at the cost and expense of other people. This is why Gandhi, who understood the nature of non-violence, and eventually gave his life for it, called this form of strength "soul force," which is non-violent communication and the practice of non-violence.

This is why I love Rachel Held Evans and her little practice, little, small practice that changes her, of taking what could turn into the vinegar, the bitterness of aggression, of rage or resentment, and making it into an object of beauty. This is why it is a spiritual practice to halt with our anger because it's fundamentally an expression of trust to believe that the universe is not a hostile place to us. The kind of faith that has nothing at all to do with creeds or beliefs; that people say, "Believe this and you'll be saved," or, "Don't believe this and you'll be damned."

It's the kind of faith that says that at the heart of existence is the capacity to reason together, to trust one another, to live in deeper more communicating, communing ways with one another.



Not too long ago someone mentioned the great Monty Python movie – it's my favorite of theirs – *Life of Brian* – the f alternative telling of the life of a Jesus-like figure. My favorite scene in the movie is where Jesus is preaching the Sermon on the Mount. And preachers, which is to say clergy as a rabbi, didn't have Madonna mics then, and so things didn't quite get heard. And this is like the outskirts of the outskirts of the outskirts away from the Sermon on the Mount. The listeners start to say, "Blessed are the – huh? What did he say? Blessed are the what? Blessed are the cheese makers." I love that joke because in the ancient Near East, it was an oral culture and things got miscommunicated all the time.

But at the base of that joke is actually a profound truth about what it means to be alive. We are going to mishear one another. We are going to misunderstand each other. We are going to misread each other. We're all imperfect. It's what we do at that point that matters the most. It's what we do at that point that makes all the difference and gets back to what Jesus actually said: "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the sons and daughters of God."

Sons and daughters of that original blessing, not that original curse, but that original blessing that still hangs within each and every one of us, and is true, especially within our universalism in this tradition, that we belong. That we are accepted. That it is love, not anger, understanding, not hate, that can be the final words of our lives. It allows us to alchemize our anger into loving action. Allows us to alchemize our anger into a deeper acceptance of all of our imperfections. Allows us to alchemize our anger into beautiful little bits of art, reminding ourselves that even in those moments where we do not feel peaceful, in fact, very far from peaceful, it does not mean that peace is not present. Amen, and may you live in blessing.

Let's pray to God. Oh, divine and limitless love, may we allow ourselves the capacity, sometimes even with sweaty palms or trembling knees, to listen to our anger, to listen to each other, and to know that to misread, misunderstand, misinterpret is not our main problem. It is in that moment when we recognize a misinterpretation or misreading has happened, and instead of connecting we choose to turn away, would armor our hearts.

May we listen to our anger and take care of ourselves.

May we listen to our anger and take care of one another.

Maybe we listen to our anger and take care.

Amen.