

# “The Heat of Passion”

Rev. Shawn Newton  
First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto  
2 February 2014

N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

**Reading** from Seeger’s book *The Incomplete Folksinger* (1972):

On all sides nowadays,  
in all corners of the world,  
one can hear people saying:  
‘But what can I do?  
I am just one small person.’  
In other words, the very existence  
of large machines,  
of large organizations,  
of mass media,  
make our individual efforts  
seem puny by comparison.  
A young peace worker was standing  
in Times Square at midnight  
with a picket sign,  
protesting escalation of the war in Vietnam.  
A passerby asked,  
“Do you think you’re going to change the world  
by standing here?”  
“No...,” came the answer,  
“But I’m going to make sure  
that the world doesn’t change me.”  
This little light of mine  
I’m gonna let it shine  
Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine...

## Sermon – “The Heat of Passion”

The story unfolded in a simple, sunny village,  
where there lived a Sufi holy-man named Nasruddin  
and a philosopher, who very much loved to argue with him.

At long last, the day had come  
for an meeting between them, arranged weeks before.

The philosopher had barely slept,  
he was so excited about his upcoming quarrel with Nasruddin  
over a difference in the two men’s views on some finer point of Islam.

But when the philosopher knocked at the door at the given hour,  
there was no answer.

Not finding Nasruddin at home,  
the philosopher began pacing and swearing up a storm.

It would have only made matters worse if he’d known  
the absent-minded mystic had actually forgotten  
their appointment and gone off to play cards in the park.

As the minutes and hours of waiting passed,  
the philosopher turned into a whirlwind of agitation.

At last, absolutely fed up, and before finally storming off toward home,  
he scrawled, in huge letters on Nasruddin’s door: “Stupid Oaf.”

And with that, he took his leave.

When the holy-man returns, he sees his door has been defaced  
and very quickly realizes he had forgotten the appointment.

Nasruddin sets off, at once, to the philosopher’s home.

Just as he began to knock, the philosopher throws open the door,  
with steam practically coming out of his ears.

And that’s when Nasruddin says,  
“My dear friend. I am so sorry.

I had completely forgotten our appointment until I returned home, and found that you had written your name on my door.”

As it turns out, sometimes we’re a lot less gentle than we are angry...<sup>1</sup>

§

In this month, as we take up in worship and in our theme groups the question of what it means “to live a life of passion,” anger may seem a very odd place to start.

Yet, passion has many different meanings, and draws on many different sources.

In the coming weeks, Lynn and I will be exploring passion from the disparate angles of desire, suffering, and purpose.

But this morning we begin with anger, which can be a driving force, a passion, for better or worse, not only in our own lives, but in the life we share with others, be that at home, at work, here at First, or out in the wider world.

Now, anger is clearly part of some of life’s most passionate moments—moments that, I should hasten to add, don’t always turn out so well.

Moments commonly marked by pain and hurt feelings, and also, sadly, at times, by rage, violence, and destruction.

By my reckoning, the single place in our culture where anger and passion intersect in an outward, conscious way is in how we might describe away some abusive outburst or some horrific act as a “crime of passion”—an instance where red-hot anger is so strong and so swift, that some act of violence follows without a hint of premeditation.

Calling such a moment a “crime of passion,” implies

---

<sup>1</sup> The preceding hymn was Holly Near’s “We are a gentle, angry people.”

that as illegal and unjust as that act might be,  
we can, in some weird way, understand, if not fully justify,  
how someone could carry out such a crime.

To do so, we look to the backstory that speaks of deep jealousy or  
a bitter betrayal, and, suddenly, without condoning the act,  
find it easier to comprehend why it happened.

## §

The word passion in its broadest definition  
is an intense and barely controllable emotion.

Anger, as one of passion's many forms, one of its several sources,  
is arguably one of the hardest of the passions to keep contained—  
even in a culture, such as ours,  
that is generally uncomfortable with extreme expressions of upset.

It's been fascinating to me to learn in my travels across the years  
just how culturally specific displays of anger tend to be.

My first big lesson that people “do” anger very differently  
from my family of origin came some twenty-five years ago,  
when I back-packed across Europe.

I had just boarded a train in Milan, and took my spot  
in a compartment of six seats that already held  
two older British gentlemen.

As I was stowing my backpack in the overhead rack,  
an Italian woman entered the compartment, lowered the window,  
and then began instructing her husband, out on the platform,  
to send her luggage and packages through.

She must have been moving house.

In short order, suitcases and boxes and shopping bags  
filled every available corner. The overhead racks were full,  
as were the empty seats and the already narrow floor space  
between our two facing rows.

It was irritating, but I was a teenager, and not exactly sure what to do.

And, besides, the closest I could get to speaking Italian was to rattle off a bit of Spanish with a funky pronunciation and an occasional hand gesture that just left true Italians looking at me in dismay.

But, if I was bothered, the Brits were beside themselves.

They protested at all of the luggage being hauled into our shared space. They frowned in a dramatic fashion, and sternly showed their displeasure.

But to no good end.

Their Italian was no better than mine, and their complaints only unleashed from the woman a fury of vowels that none of us could, actually, and probably for the best, understand.

What was clear was that all four of us were angry.

But there wasn't much, at that point, that could be done.

The train was rolling toward Venice—the woman, and we with her, ensconced in a pile of our own baggage, so to speak.

The stiff and awkward silence held until the woman began to unpack her bags.

And then, to my eyes, the most astonishing thing occurred.

A feast broke out, as the woman pulled bread, and olives, and cheeses from her enormous purse.

Then came the wine and delicate white cookies I remember to this day.

In no time, in spite of our playing into almost every cultural stereotype available to us along the way, our anger dissipated, and ill-feeling gave way to good-will.

Across barriers of language, peace had broken out.

Hostility had been transformed by hospitality.

What was wrong, or at least profoundly inconvenient, had been made right, or at least bearable.

§

The English word “anger” derives from the Old Norse word that meant trouble, affliction, pain.

In his book on the subject of anger, Robert A. F. Thurman says that “...*anger is pain, it comes from feeling pain, and it moves to inflict pain.*”

Anger comes from feeling pain and moves to pass that pain along.

Now, I don’t know about you,  
but that assertion makes me very uncomfortable.

Though I’ve come a long way  
in being able to hear out someone else’s anger or express my own,  
what unsettles me is Thurman’s point  
about the seemingly endless cycle that pushes pain along.

Most of the world’s great religions have had something to say  
about this pattern, about this very human process.

Each, in its own way, affirming the point that it’s not that we feel anger;  
but rather, how we handle it when we do.

Hinduism and Buddhism teach that anger stems from unfulfilled desires  
and that freeing ourselves from attachments and expectations  
is the only way out of its destructive grip.

Judaism holds that anger is a negative impulse to be subdued.

Christianity famously advocates for turning the other cheek.

And Islam says anger stems from selfish desires that must be overcome,  
brought under control through submission.

There are, of course, millennia of wisdom in this religious guidance.

Sometimes, to be sure, letting go or clamping down or turning away may, indeed, be the most prudent path in the face of anger.

And, yet, there's something about each approach that leaves me unsettled.

I'm just not so sure that anger that is avoided or tamped down or resisted actually, always goes away.

Anger has a funny way of expressing itself unless it's been given its due—or, better yet, until it has somehow been transformed.

This is where I think anger and passion meet up in a way that can be productive, and maybe even positive: when we sit with the question of how we might channel our anger toward some greater good.

To do this, it's worth taking a deep breath.  
Maybe a few of them.  
And maybe for days, for weeks, for months or more.

And then looking into our own heart (or the heart of another) to see where the anger is really rooted.

If we look long and hard enough, we may well discover that it is rooted in love, in care, in concern for something or someone that is profoundly precious to us or to another.

Anger is such a strong emotion, it seems, that it is only summoned when what we treasure is at risk.

It often springs up when a lack of respect, and especially blatant disrespect, is shown for what we most deeply value.

A meditation by Unitarian minister Edward Frost begins, "I love those who are angry with me because they care deeply about something they feel I may have hurt."

How hard it is to know and trust that this is true of those we upset, as well as those who upset us.

One of the times when I've been the angriest in my life began about eighteen years ago.  
I say began, because it lasted a good long while.

I had made the decision, for many complicated reasons, to leave the life I had built in my early 20s in Dallas and move back to Boston.

It meant leaving behind a job and a community that had been to me, quite literally, a lifeline at a critical juncture in my journey.

But when my friend Bill, whom I had taken care of, died of AIDS, and my boyfriend at the time and I broke up, I knew it was time to go.

I had never intended or wanted to live in Dallas anyway. Being there, I had put plans and dreams on hold to contend with catastrophes that had come my way.

And, I knew in the deepest part of my being, that if I didn't go, some vital part of me would die there, too.

About a year later, as I was getting established in Boston, a friend from Dallas was visiting and casually mentioned at one point a snarky comment made by someone I had known—a close friend of a friend.

She basically said I had blown my big chance, and that my life would never amount to much.

It ticked me off. Royally.

On one hand, I was struggling to get a foothold, trying to make ends meet and put myself through university.

And it occurred to me, more than once, that she might well be right.

And I hated that thought, and even more the queasy, sinking feeling it left inside me.

It made me angry.  
But it strengthened my resolve.



Though she doesn't deserve full credit,  
she was responsible in ways it took me years to understand  
for stirring up in me the passion to propel myself  
through years of academic work and professional hoops.

“I love those who are angry with me  
because they care deeply about something they feel I may have hurt.”

In unintended ways, my anger at her anger, unlocked reserves of fuel  
that powered me through a challenging chunk of my life.

It's hard to find an appropriate greeting card for that at Hallmark;  
but, today, I am strangely grateful  
for her words and her concern for my well-being.

§

There's a saying in leadership circles that you should never waste a crisis.

I think the same thing can be said of anger—  
be it our own or that directed toward us.

We should never waste it.

It may be that we eventually relinquish it or resist it,  
but I hope not before we've studied it,  
seeking to understand its meaning,  
and the deeply valued thing to which it points.

On this day that we honour the life of Pete Seeger,  
we celebrate a person who did such a powerful job  
of not only understanding his anger,  
but taking seriously what it asked of him.

May we, too, harness the passion that is stirred by anger,  
that we might put it to good use:  
honouring what is most precious,  
healing whatever has been hurt,  
and becoming a truly gentle, angry people, singing for our lives.

Amen.