

## FIFTY PERCENT

A sermon preached by Galen Guengerich  
All Souls Unitarian Church, New York City  
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Last evening at 9:54 p.m. Eastern Standard Time, the center of the sun passed through the plane of the Earth's equator on its way from north of the equatorial plane to south of it, marking the time known in the northern hemisphere as the autumnal equinox. We're halfway from the longest day of the year to the shortest day of the year, halfway from the warmth and light of summer to the chill and dark of winter. For one brief moment, light and dark balance each other in perfect equipoise, dividing the day into two halves.

The ancient Babylonians had a different way of dividing up the cosmos. The Babylonian story of creation known as the *Enuma Elish*, which came into being about 4,000 years ago, says that in the beginning there existed a highly sexualized primordial chaos. This chaos was understood as female and was given the name Tiamat, the dragon goddess of the ocean. Tiamat existed alongside her male counterpart and husband Apsu, the ruler who embodied the principle of order. Apsu feared Tiamat and her offspring would overpower him and usurp the throne, so he attacked them, but he himself was killed. In retaliation, the storm-god Marduk slew Tiamat. He threw the two halves of Tiamat's severed body – one up to form the heavens and the other down to form the earth. On these terms, creation itself was the act of imposing order upon the supposed chaos of female sexuality by conquering it. This beginning didn't bode well for women.

About a thousand years after the *Enuma Elish*, the well-known story appeared that opens the book of Genesis in the Hebrew Bible. It blames the temptress Eve for seducing Adam, which led to the couple being cast out of the Garden of Eden and into our present world of sin and suffering.

Ever since Genesis, especially in the West, the patriarchs in power — and especially the religious patriarchs in power — have blamed women for male sexual desire and tried to make them responsible for its consequences. If men can't control their desire for women, this retrograde theory has argued, then women must themselves be controlled by men — how they dress, how they act, and especially when and with whom they have sex and reproduce. The effort to exert control over the lives and bodies of women has played a central role in the Abrahamic religions of the West, all of which feature a male God. As the feminist theologian Mary Daly famously put it, "If God is male, then male is God."

Given this hierarchy, when men don't get what they want, all hell tends to break loose. One of the oldest and most influential stories in all of Western literature, Homer's *Iliad*, was composed nearly three thousand years ago. It's roughly contemporary with

the book of Genesis. The *Iliad* and its sequel, the *Odyssey*, were the Hunger Games of the ancient world: epic in length, encyclopedic in scope, and wildly popular. The books cover the roughly ten-year battle between the Greeks and the Trojans.

What were they fighting over? The very first word of the *Iliad* is the Greek word μῆνιν, which means “rage.” The word refers to the fury of the Greek hero Achilles, who becomes enraged when his share of war plunder, a young maiden named Briseis, is taken from him by the Greek commander Agamemnon.

In [Stephen Mitchell's superb translation of the \*Iliad\*](#), the story opens with these words:

The rage of Achilles — sing it now, goddess, sing *through* me  
the deadly rage that caused the Achaeans such grief  
and hurled down to Hades the souls of so many fighters,  
leaving their naked flesh to be eaten by dogs  
and carrion birds, as the will of Zeus was accomplished.

The idea of sexually-entitled men going on the warpath, whether individually or collectively, whether physically or emotionally or institutionally, is an idea that's deeply embedded in Western culture. In the opening lines of the *Iliad*, Homer assumes that it's the prerogative of Achilles and Agamemnon — their privilege as males — to fight over sexual possession of Briseis. Which man she may have wanted, if indeed she wanted either of them, isn't part of the story. Neither is her own rage, which must have fully equaled the rage of Achilles and which Homer doesn't even bother to mention or wonder about.

I thought about these ancient stories, especially the one about the rage of Achilles, as I was reading an [excerpt from Rebecca Thraister's new book](#) titled *Good and Mad: The Revolutionary Power of Women's Anger*. She observes that anger gave impetus to the founding of our nation. She says, “The idealized vision of what this country might be was born of the virtuous, and sometimes chaotic, fury of the unrepresented. We are taught it as patriotic catechism — give me liberty or give me death; live free or die; don't tread on me. We carve our Founders' anger into buildings, visit their broken bells, name contemporary political factions after the temper tantrums they threw, dressed in native garb, dumping tea in a harbor. We call these events a revolution.”

To state her conclusion in different terms, one could say that anger has long been viewed as one of the founding sacraments of our nation's civic religion. But not everyone has been granted the right to partake of this sacrament. Thraister goes on to point out that only white men in the US have had the right to be angry — and white men have disproportionately benefited from their righteous anger.

She says, “As nobly enraged as the Founders were at being taxed and policed by a government in which they had no voice or vote, they failed, we know, to establish a true

representative democracy. Their government was one in which a minority ruled. The few cleared the field of competition by subjugating the many — the enslaved, women — and then built their economic and political power on the labor of those they'd deprived of any say in civic or social life.”

This is where the approach sanctioned by the *Enuma Elish* reappears. In order to keep the system of minority rule in place, our founders and most of their heirs over the centuries, including many of the men in power today, have attempted to impose the supposed principle of male order upon the supposed chaos of female anger.

Thraister says, “It is order, after all, that throughout our history has worked to suppress the anger of women, to discourage us from speaking it or even feeling it. And when women have gotten mad, they’ve been ignored or marginalized, laughed or blanched at, their vehement objections treated as irrational theater, inconsequential to the important matter of governing the nation. This has always been an error. Look to the start, the germinating seeds, of nearly every major social and political movement that has shaped this nation — from abolition to suffrage to labor to civil rights and LGBTQ rights to, yes, feminism — and you will find near its start the passionate dissent of women.”

Especially as many women have assertively voiced their anger about the conduct and content of the Kavanaugh Supreme Court confirmation hearings — anger that’s both justified and righteous — many men, including some on the Senate Judiciary Committee, have tried to suppress the anger. They want to impose the old order once again.

If they succeed, it will be the most un-American outcome of all. The presence of righteous anger as a point of fulcrum is not a sign of democracy’s demise, but rather its dominance. As Thraister puts it, “This is the way democracy is supposed to work — and the reason these men are getting so upset is that the force of female protest right now feels like it has the potential to shake our power structure to its core.”

In [Carlos Lozada’s Washington Post review](#) of Thraister’s book and of Soraya Chemaly’s new book titled *Rage Becomes Her: The Power of Women’s Anger*, he describes his wife’s response when he read aloud several passages from the two books to her late one night. As he read, she looked at him with arched eyebrows. “You didn’t know that?” she asked him quietly. His response: no, I didn’t.

Truth be told, I too have seen those arched eyebrows from my wife. I’ve been asked that question. Sadly, my honest response was some variation on Lozada’s response. There’s a lot that I didn’t know — and don’t know — about what it’s like to go through life as a woman. The same is true of the experience of going through life as a person of color, or a person with a non-conforming gender identity, or person with a disability. There’s a lot that I have not needed to be afraid about, or worry about, or be angry about.

Lozada calls the ability to not know these things a luxury. A year after Harvey Weinstein and nearly two years after Trump’s “Access Hollywood” video, he says, after

hearing so many #MeToo stories and reading books on the structures of misogyny, “there was still so much I didn’t know about the depths of anger that these accounts draw from — so much, I suppose, I had the luxury of not knowing.”

He continues, “I didn’t know that, by the time they are preschoolers, children learn that boys can express their anger but that girls must suppress theirs. I didn’t know how much physical pain women endure in their lives, simply because they are women, and how frequently that pain is discounted, deemed “emotional.” I didn’t fully grasp how throughout our political history, principled rage has been lionized when emanating from men, but pathologized when coming from women, acceptable when it upholds women’s roles as nurturers, not when it serves their personal ambitions or collective aspirations.”

Lozada concludes his review by describing what happened the day after he read to his wife from Thraister and Chemaly’s books. “The next morning,” he says, “after my enthusiasm for these books betrayed ignorance about various aspects of female life, she assured me that she didn’t think I was an idiot, resignation and sympathy mingling on her face.” He adds, “If there was anger there, too, she knew how to hide it.”

For my part, I’m grateful that more and more women are expressing their anger. It’s not only a good thing for our democracy, but it’s also good thing for our souls.

After all, righteous anger has been an essential force in religion from the beginning. In the Hebrew Bible, God regularly expresses wrath toward those who are wicked and unrighteous. The Hebrew prophets express anger at the waywardness of the people of Israel and the self-serving actions of their kings. In the Christian New Testament, Jesus expresses outrage at those who use the temple as a place of commerce. Righteous anger – anger in the service of the good – has always been essential to the life of faith.

The tradition of righteous anger was taken up by our Unitarian Universalist forebears, who were typically among the first to express anger at societal injustices. Unitarian suffragists Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Margaret Fuller helped organize the first Women’s Rights Convention, held in Seneca Falls, New York, in 1848. The First Unitarian Church of Rochester, New York hosted the second convention several years later. To be sure, their efforts were imperfect and involved their own biases, including racial biases. Today, we as Unitarian Universalists focus on a wide range of social justice issues – women’s rights, civil rights, gay rights, human rights, and so on.

As Thraister notes, women have always helped germinate the seeds of dissent and transformation. Our tradition of faith has long recognized this leadership. One of my first sermons at All Souls, preached 25 years ago, was titled, “On Being a Man in a Woman’s World.” In the sermon, I said:

I am convinced that the values which unite our [faith] community lie along what Audre Lorde calls a “deeply female and spiritual plane.” The life force

of women bears a world stamped by deep sharing and intimate connection. This life force is the same spirit of life which we gather to celebrate as Unitarian Universalists. Lorde describes this spirit as “the power which comes from sharing deeply any pursuit with another person.”

Our commitments as a faith community are based on our bedrock belief in the human dignity of each and every person. We also believe that cultures can change. People can change. We can change. We can engage righteous anger in the service of the good. Transformation may not happen quickly, and it may not happen easily, but it can happen. After all, the God we serve is a God of possibility.