

## AMERICAN ANGER

A sermon preached by Galen Guengerich  
All Souls Unitarian Church, New York City  
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On Election Day, Donald Trump surged to Electoral College victory on a tidal wave of anger voiced by almost half of America's voters. On Friday, Trump was sworn in as our nation's 45<sup>th</sup> president against a tidal wave of anger voiced by almost everyone else. As far as I can tell, almost everyone in America is angry.

The anger of Trump voters was partly cultural and religious, and partly economic. Robert P. Jones, author of *The End of White Christian America*, observed several days after the election that America has been transformed over the past eight years from being a majority to a minority white Christian nation — from 54% white Christian to 43% white Christian. Jones says, "As the sun is slowly setting on the cultural world of white Christian America, they've managed, at least in this election, to rage against the dying of the light."

The anger of white Christians melded with the anger of other Trump voters, whose grievances were more economic than religious. Living in the rural communities of our nation, surrounded by shuttered stores and rusting factories, beleaguered by rising debt and disdained by political elites, they found a vocal and vigorous champion for their anger in the person of Donald Trump.

As a candidate, Trump eagerly assumed the role of anger personified: vile, vitriolic, and vituperous. In his inaugural address as president, he seemed angrier still. *The Washington Post* listed words from Trump's speech that have never before appeared in an inaugural address: carnage, disrepair, rusted, stealing, ripped, tombstones, trapped, and so on.

The angry backlash of non-Trump voters began immediately after the election and continued in yesterday's protests. Many — myself included — find it almost inconceivable that our nation could elect a man for president who is so manifestly and triumphantly ill-prepared for the job. His insistence on being our nation's Divider-in-Chief has been truly terrifying, as he has faced off against immigrants, Mexicans, Muslims, Jews, people of color, women, and LGBTQ people, among others.

Then there's the issue of his character. Whatever you may think of Barack Obama's politics, he is — in my view, at least — the kind of man we can point to as a role model for young men, encouraging our sons to aspire to become like him. Whatever you may think of Donald Trump's politics, he is — in my view, at least — the kind of man we can point to and insist that our sons not become like him.

Make no mistake: Trump is not the first president of our nation to suffer from a serious deficit in the character department. The Oval Office has seen its share of

scoundrels. But in the old days, presidents mostly kept their character deficits under wraps and out of sight, and the press and the public didn't ask and didn't tell.

Even so, as I said in my pastoral message several days after Trump's election, if I didn't believe people can sometimes rise above the limitations of their past selves to meet the challenges life presses upon them, I wouldn't be a minister. Maybe Trump will end up serving all Americans as president, as he promised on Thursday. Maybe he will lift our sights and heal our divisions, as he promised on Friday. For now at least, I'm willing to suspend final judgment.

But that doesn't mean I'm not angry — angry that fear has trampled hope, angry that misogyny and racism have trampled equality, angry that retribution has trampled opportunity. Donald Trump became president because he promised to turn America around and head back to where we came from. I don't want to turn back; I want to keep pressing ahead.

Here's why. I believe it matters in which direction we're headed as a nation — forward or backward. If you head one direction long enough, you will eventually get there. And I'm angry about heading backward.

My sermon title is taken from the title of a new book by the American poet H. L. Hix. The book is titled *American Anger: An Evidentiary*. In his poem titled "Anger, theorized, v. 1," Hix quotes the University of Chicago philosopher and legal scholar Martha Nussbaum, who writes, "Anger is a reasonable type of emotion to have, in a world where it is reasonable to care deeply about things that can be damaged by others." Nussbaum adds, "Anger involves a belief about damage wrongly inflicted."

In this sense, our nation was founded on anger. In his poem titled "Anger, considered as fundament," Hix notes that the Declaration of Independence begins with high-sounding bluster about self-evident truths and unalienable rights, as well as praise for life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. But, he says, most of the Declaration consists of grouching about what the king did to us — the king did this to us, the king did that to us; damage wrongly inflicted. Hix then asks:

What, after all that, is the first claim the colonies stake  
upon declaring themselves "Free and Independent States"?  
Not a right to be left in peace,  
but that "they have full Power to levy War."  
*This country is founded on anger.*

Over the centuries since our nation was founded, the focus of our anger has been continually changing — with whom we are angry as a nation, and why. But our tendency has always been to blame whatever is bothering us — and "us" has historically meant white Christians — on them, which has usually referred to everyone else. Slowly and haltingly over the decades, especially more recently, we have been moving ever more

fully in the direction of embodying our nation's founding creed of liberty, equality, and opportunity for everyone. And now our president wants to turn us back.

It matters in which direction we're headed – whether forward or backward. If you head one direction long enough, you will eventually get there.

Ten days ago, I was standing on a rocky outcrop overlooking one of the settlements in the West Bank, also known as the Occupied Territories, also known as Palestine. The outcrop stands about 20 minutes east of Jerusalem, in Area C, which makes up two-thirds of the West Bank and over which Israel maintains full civil and military control. More specifically, the outcrop was in E-1 area, where President Obama has insisted for years that the Israelis stop building settlements, which they have. I went to see what was likely to change when Donald Trump took office.

I went with Itay Epshtain, Policy and Protection Advisor for the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) and his colleague Rachel Sider, along with Gal Hertz, one of my colleagues from the Minerva Humanities Center at Tel Aviv University, where I serve on the board. The Norwegian Refugee Council is by far the largest provider of humanitarian relief services to Palestinians in the Occupied Territories.

We drove through the existing settlements in the area, which belie the typical view that settlers are courageous zealots living in hazardous conditions. Each settlement is a relatively self-contained and fully-functioning small city, with a typical population of upwards of 50,000 people. The settlements are beautiful — think Brooklyn in light brown stone on the hills instead of dark brownstone on the flat. There are K-12 schools and country clubs with swimming pools. Most of the settlers are not politically motivated, Itay said. They just want an affordable place to live that's within commuting distance of Jerusalem.

In order to reach the outcrop, we drove up a wide boulevard to the top of a long, winding ridge. We stopped just outside the security fence of an impressive multi-story police station, which was fully staffed. This police station stands at the center of a planned settlement of 30,000 new homes, Itay said. All the infrastructure is already in — the roads, the water, the electric, and the sewer. Now that Trump has taken office, the digging may soon begin.

As we left the outcrop, we drove through one of the Arab towns that remain squeezed in among the settlements. We also drove through a Bedouin encampment, an enclave of tarp and tin precariously perched on the side of a hill in the shadow of one of the settlements. Slowly, these Palestinians are being pushed out or forcibly removed.

Itay remarked that NRC provides homes for Palestinians in the Occupied Territories — 1,500 last year — but the Israelis tear them down as fast as they're built, insisting that the homes are illegal structures. The Israelis had torn down 150 NRC-built homes in the previous 17 days, he said. Itay pointed to a latrine NRC had provided to the Bedouins. It's been there for two weeks, he said, and it'll be torn down any day now.

Among other services, NRC provides legal representation for Palestinians who have been forcibly evicted or relocated, or whose homes have been torn down. What's

your success rate, I asked. Zero, he replied. In 15 years, we've never won a case. How do you deal with such constant defeat? He shrugged and replied, I swear a lot.

Itay told me that people on the ground in Palestine have given up on a two-state solution. In practical terms, he said, it's impossible. The population of the settlements is too large — 530,000 and counting — and the settlements are too widely dispersed for a contiguous Palestinian state to be viable. The reason politicians keep talking about a two-state solution, he said, is to keep from having to talk about other options.

If you head one direction long enough, you will eventually get there. Israel has been building settlements for years, making a two-state solution ever more difficult. If Itay is to be believed, it's now impossible.

Given these grim realities, I asked Itay how he remains hopeful and optimistic as he confronts such egregious human rights violations every day. I'm not hopeful and optimistic, he said. But the Palestinians need help, and I can help, so that's what I do. To which his colleague Rachel added: and he swears a lot.

Anger, Martha Nussbaum reminds us, involves a belief about damage wrongly inflicted. In his poem titled, "Anger theorized, v. 3," Hix quotes the classicist and philosopher Paul Woodruff:

"[W]e should not want to wipe [anger] out,  
but to bring [it] into harmony with reason."  
And, "anger is to injustice as pain is to injury.  
If you do not notice pain you may perish  
through unnoticed injuries. If you are unable to suffer anger,  
you may not recognize injustice,  
and so be wiped out by the transgressions of others...."

Our capacity for anger functions as our sensitivity to injustice.  
Anger and justice are yoked.  
An individual is just  
insofar as his or her anger is keyed to injustice....  
Learning to be angry better is part of acquiring justice...."

In the Christian New Testament, the Apostle Paul echoes this view of anger, when he says to believers in Ephesus, "Be angry, but do not sin." In other words, be angry for the right reasons. Let your anger compel you to act for the right purposes.

It matters in which direction we're headed as a nation. Here on the cusp of a Trump presidency and all it forebodes for our nation and our world, I want to learn to be angry better. I want to notice pain and injury better. I want to recognize injustice better, whether it happens in our nation or elsewhere. Otherwise, we may eventually get too far along the road we've now turned down as a nation that it will be impossible to make our way back.

Unlike Itay, I remain optimistic – not because I think everything will eventually turn out alright. It may not. But like Itay, I believe that I can help. So can you.

The word optimism, after all, comes from an ancient word meaning power. Optimism is the power to do the work that is ours to do. As Voltaire enjoined in *Candide*, we must tend our fields — do the work that is ours to do.

Our work is to learn how to be angry better. Our work is to keep our anger yoked to justice. Our work is to help whenever and wherever we can.

We do our work knowing that our calling is a divine calling. Our experience of God connects us not only to all that is past, no matter how burdensome, and to all that is present, no matter how distressing, but also to all that is possible, no matter how elusive. We're headed one direction and one direction only: toward dignity, equality, and opportunity for everyone. That's possible, and we serve what is possible.