THE OBJECT OF ANGER
A Sermon Preached by Pamela Patton
All Souls, New York City
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This is the second sermon in a two part series on anger. Last Sunday I talked about what anger does inside us—how it hijacks our awareness that we have a choice about how we speak or act, how pausing allows the anger to subside so it only lasts 90 seconds if we don't feed it with stories.

Today I want to talk about how anger affects our perspective on other people. So we're moving from the spiritual practice for handling the anger inside us to the practice of seeing and responding to what anger does between us.

It so happens that just this week I had an experience that enabled me to test my own practice with the anger between us. It's not really a surprise since actually the anger between us comes up all day every day whether we're riding the bus or reading the news. In this particular case it happened on Wednesday. I arrived here at the church mid-morning for a meeting with my colleague Kenny. I didn't go to my office, instead I headed to the mezzanine floor, right below us, to Kenny's office. I stopped in the restroom. I put my smoothie, my backpack and my coat by the sink while I went into the stall. Meanwhile someone else came in to the bathroom. I didn't see her, but I knew there was a school orchestra renting the sanctuary for a concert, and I imagined it was a proud mother or grandmother coming to cheer on the children.

I washed my hands, grabbed my belongings next to the sink and headed to Kenny's office. After our meeting, I realized I had forgotten my coat in the restroom. I looked for it, and it wasn't there. I assumed someone had seen the coat and turned it into the lost and found. I think of this church as a second home, a place where we take care of each other.

I checked the lost and found. No luck. I asked around. No luck. Kenny looked at the security footage and called to let me know that in fact a woman had left the restroom right after me. She was the only person who had exited the restroom with a large bag in the past few hours. And she had looked over her shoulder as she left.

My husband gave me the coat 25 years ago; he had bought it from a street vendor who made the coat from an Indian shawl. I loved that coat. I turned my mind to my work day.

As I walked home that evening, chilly without my coat, I realized my anger had been simmering underneath the distractions of my meetings and

tasks. Who steals a minister's coat from her very own beloved church? I wanted to call Kenny and ask him to show me the security footage. I wanted to know exactly how long was the thief in the bathroom after I left. I wondered if she stuffed the coat in her bag in a way that would have led me to believe she was just taking it the lost and found if I walked in and caught her? How quickly did she exit the bathroom? Was she attending the concert upstairs? I got hungrier and hungrier for the details I needed to construct this person in my mind.

As I built my anger, I made this stranger into a story. I imagined her personality, her enthusiasm for the golden opportunity to snatch my beautiful coat. And the story felt comforting; it satisfied my urgent need to assert myself in light of the violation.

The Jewish theologian Martin Buber's most famous work, I -Thou, focused on relations between us. I-Thou is about how we are sacred to one another. When another person is a Thou, they are a fellow traveler, complex, full of contradictions, full of confusion, pride, and regret like us. The I and the Thou belong to each other.

Buber contrasts I-Thou with I-It. When the other person is an It, they fit into a category, a means to an end, not like us at all, they are wholly other. The I-It is a transactional relationship. This contrast between I-Thou and I-It is a keystone in Unitarian Universalist theology. James Luther Adams, an important 20th century Unitarian Universalist theologian, was profoundly influenced by Buber's insights which he applied to our understanding of covenant.

Buber acknowledges it's part of our human experience to fluctuate between I-Thou and I-It. You probably felt some resistance in today's meditation when I asked you to consider someone you're frustrated with and say "you belong to me, and I belong to you." This is normal and common to all of us, no matter how much we may aspire to a universal I-Thou connection.

Of course it's reasonable to be angry that my coat was stolen from this place where I work and worship, where I have such a deep sense that you and I belong to each other.

It's ok to feel the anger arise. Anger wakes us up. But we need to pause long enough to see that we have choices about what to say and do next, choices about whether the anger leads somewhere or just stays anger. Writer and teacher Ruth King says: "Anger is initiatory, not transformative."

King grew up in the thick of the Watts riots, she had a baby at age fifteen, her father was murdered when she was seventeen, and she

described her experience of childhood and young adulthood as “a barely contained volcano, wrapped tightly in righteous indignation…The rage was overpowering. I had no sense or skill of how to keep it under wraps, having held it for so long.”

By her mid 20s King was a highly accomplished consultant on leadership and diversity for Fortune 500 companies. She was also earning a degree in clinical psychology. She writes, “While my background brought awareness and understanding, it did not transform my relationship to rage or racial distress.” And yet after a turning point in her life, she recognized that she could work with the rage through mindfulness, she had a choice about what to do with the rage. The practice she teaches in her Mindful of Race Institute is pausing, choosing, and moving anger from initiation to transformation. This applies to all our lives, even moments that challenge us on a relatively trivial level like dealing with a stolen coat.

The timing of my coat swipe was pretty perfect, between two sermons on anger. I could see that I was building an It out of the thief, my temptation to watch the footage so I could play-by-play construct this person into the most satisfying object. If I could conclude “She’s wrong, I’m right, she’s bad, I’m good” then the world would make sense again. Making her into an It was a pain reliever…With some strategic pausing I could see that it was easier to make an enemy than to sit with the feeling of having my safety violated. But I caught myself and remembered my spiritual practice, my own preaching.

I wish my stolen coat were the only reason to get angry since my last sermon. So many of us are living in a state of chronic anger right now. It’s difficult to find the capacity to take a pause to let the anger run its course so we can get some perspective on it. The news is a constant narrative, delivering prompts that keep us hooked out of a sense of responsibility for our earth, democracy, racial injustice, and fellow humans far and wide. And we seek pain relievers with I-It explanations to help us make sense of it all.

I told a story last week of two monks, an elder and a novice, walking together. They come to a river, a woman asks for help crossing, and the elder monk carries her across. Their vows forbid physical contact with women, and hours later, the young monk bursts out in anger toward the elder monk for touching the woman, having rehearsed his outrage in silence for the whole walk. The elder monk responds: “I set her down at the river. You're still carrying her.”

We’re doing with the news what the young monk did to himself on the road. We’re building a narrative, hour after hour, that keeps the anger

circuits firing indefinitely. This turns millions of people—whoever in our imagination opposes our views—into Its. We call it responsibility, paying attention, citizenship, but in fact it's basically letting our anger be the boss. Writer George Saunders comments on how anger and fear make us crave an autopilot that feels sturdy. His antidote to get concrete about the actual people, the actual situation in front of you, rather than staying in the abstract. This is another way of describing the move from It to Thou: "You don't want to squeeze out judgment, but you want to squeeze out that quality of empty, agitated, abstract opining that seems to be prevalent right now — and which I don't think really produces much except angst." We know the feeling.

You know it's a mistake, but you look at your phone one more time before you go to bed. You come across something that outrages you, maybe a politician's statement or news of terrible violence, and your anger flares. You compose an incisive brutally honest response in your head that you'll never send. You read the comments. You find the people who agree with you, and it feels like solidarity because your anger has found company. An hour later you're mad at yourself for staying up too late and engrossing yourself in your phone, and you haven't done a single thing to change what made you angry. And you can't sleep. That's the opining Saunders is talking about. It feels like paying attention. It feels like caring. But it's really ruminating. Nothing is transformed.

The question isn't how to stop being angry about the news. It's ok to be angry, we're angry because we care about other people. The question is whether the anger is initiatory, a messenger that you can handle mindfully, understanding that it presents choices that can lead to transformation. We can ask ourselves: Am I stuck in the throes of anger and burning out? Am I doomscrolling and fueling the anger, carrying it down the road like the young monk? Is that doing anyone any good? Do I often feel I'm in the painful state of "empty, agitated, abstract opining?"

By reconsidering the objects of our anger, the Its, we can begin to see what transformation looks like.

Patton Oswalt is a comedian who shares his liberal progressive views on Twitter, and he was trolled by someone with sharply opposing political views who provoked him rudely with inflammatory and abusive comments. Oswalt reacted like we all do when we're attacked, he wrote back with equal provocation. But after the initiatory experience of anger he paused, and it occurred to him he had a choice about his next move. He looked up the profile of the provocateur, a guy named Beatty, and he found Beatty's GoFundMe page. Oswalt discovered that the guy had major medical issues

that had destroyed him financially. Suddenly Beatty was no longer an It, he became a Thou. After reading Beatty's story, Oswalt tweeted "Aw, man. This dude just attacked me on Twitter and I joked back but then I looked at his timeline and he's in a LOT of trouble health-wise. I'd be [angry] too. He's been dealt some [lousy] cards — let's deal him some good ones. Click and donate — just like I am about to." Oswalt contributed $2000 to Beatty's GoFundMe and he encouraged his followers to do the same. Within a half hour Beatty's goal was exceeded by $30,000.

Beatty was in shock, he wrote "You have humbled me to the point where I can barely compose my words. You have caused me to take pause and reflect on how harmful words from my mouth could resolve in such an outpouring. Thank you for this."

The story offers some inspiration about how to stay calm in a raging world. It doesn't mean you have to extend a hand to demonstrate this degree of generosity and kindness. The key is to be open to the fact that people are more complex than they seem. There is more going on than our anger allows us to see.

When Ruth King says anger is initiatory, she means that is shows us what deserves our attention, our resistance, our creativity. But if we mistake the flare of anger for action, nothing is transformed. Pausing allows us to do the hard slow labor of discerning how we can make a difference. That difference may feel microscopic, but it's still much more satisfying and effective than staying in perma-rage.

Do we really want to be stuck in angst? We can choose to see Thou or It. And we have to keep at it. Buber knew, we all know, how hard it is to sustain I-Thou in our day to day lives.

Part of the I-Thou practice is how we respond when we fail at it. We'll forget the pause, we'll flip our lids, we'll reduce someone to an It, we'll say or do something we regret. We won't get it right every time. And when we get it wrong, we acknowledge it, we say sorry, we forgive ourselves, and we try again. This is why it's called a spiritual *practice*. Unitarian Universalist theologian Adams wrote, "We are promise-making, promise-keeping, promise-breaking, promise-renewing creatures."

Anger tells us something is broken and needs our attention. That's its gift. But anger can't do the transformation. Moving from It to Thou–that's our work to do.