



Auckland Unitarian Church
Love beyond belief

Trigger happy: What sets me off?

Clay Nelson © 12 September 2021

Last week in my musings about conspiracy theorists I relied on my pastoral training to encourage you “to respect their human dignity and listen to them. Ask questions about their fears. Remain connected to them. Love them.” What the hell was I thinking? This is a case of do as I say, not as I do. Those who spread conspiracy theories that endanger people, enrage me.

Last week I found in the letterbox a slick pamphlet telling me why it was dangerous to get a Covid vaccine and that wearing a mask is a government plot to take away my freedom of choice. It looked like it was sent by an official organisation. I explored who they were on the Internet, but I could find no mention of them. It was designed to take in the vulnerable and undermine public health. I was pissed off. I know Unitarians don’t believe in hell, but I thought we should reconsider our position so I could consign these demons to Dante’s ninth level of hell, Cocytus, the last circle of Hell. This deepest, most terrible circle is reserved for those who betray, where they are encased in a frozen lake for all eternity.

Before Covid, I already had a lengthy list of those I thought eligible for one of Dante’s circles: bullies, racists, paedophiles, the corrupt, homophobes who use freedom of religion to abuse the LGBTQ community, war criminals, slavers, misogynists, and exploiters of the marginalised all keep my blood at a boiling temperature. Since the pandemic, the list has been expanded to include those who protect and strengthen systemic racism, like David Seymour, leader of the conservative Act Party, who tweeted the code intended to make it easier for Māori to get an appointment for a vaccine, so Pākehā could use it instead. And then there are those Aussie politicians trying to convince their people they just have to learn to live with Delta even as they are dying from it, rather than make the hard choices that are inconvenient and may have economic consequences. Are profits really more important than people’s lives? Apparently some think so, like the neoliberal forces of capitalism who have used this “shock doctrine” moment to deploy their own brand of pandemic capitalism, taking wage subsidies and not passing them on to the employees the government is trying to protect.

It may not be very pastoral, but oh, it feels so good to get that off my chest. These are some of my triggers and I feel ever so justified in my self-righteousness to fire away. That is until I remember the words of one of my beloved theologians, Frederick Buechner:

Of the seven deadly sins, anger is possibly the most fun. To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll over your tongue the prospect of bitter confrontations still to come, to savour to the last toothsome morsel both the pain you are given and the pain you are giving back — in many ways it is a feast fit for a king. The chief drawback is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is you.

There is also a Zen story that teaches a little more about the hell I crave for those who trample social, economic and earth justice and deny human rights to others.

A big, fierce samurai once addressed a little monk. “Monk,” he bellowed, accustomed to instant obedience, “teach me about heaven and hell!”

The monk looked up at this warrior with disdain, "Teach you about heaven and hell? I can't teach you anything. You're filthy. You smell. Your blade is rusty. You're an embarrassment to the samurai class."

The samurai shook with fury. Red in the face, speechless with rage, he unsheathed his sword and raised it above him, preparing to smite the monk.

"This is hell," the monk said softly.

The samurai stopped and looked down at the little monk, touched by the compassion and surrender of this man who had offered to give his life to teach about hell. The samurai lowered his sword, filled with gratitude and peace.

"And this is heaven," said the monk.

The Revd Jill Cowie tells this story: Mary Jane was on her way home to Denver. At the Omaha airport, she bought a newspaper and a small packet of biscuits for the transit, then took a seat at her gate and began to pursue the news. Another passenger sat down, pulled a book out of his briefcase and began to read. She heard a rustle and noticed over the edge of her paper that he was opening a packet. Actually, she couldn't believe it, he was opening her packet, the one with her things on the seat between them. Her packet. Her biscuits. He took two. She was speechless. She reached over and took out one, making sure he saw her. Maybe he thought the packet had been left there. But no. He munched away, and then took another one. She reached over and took another, thinking surely he'd realise what he'd done. There was only one cookie left now. She could hardly believe it when he pushed the near-empty container toward her, implying it was hers for the taking. The gall! And then he got up, and walked away toward the place where she'd bought the cookies. Imagine her surprise when she boarded the plane, opened her bag, and found the unopened packet of biscuits.

Can you relate? Who is this other person who can trigger us like this? It's no secret that the most challenging aspect of a spiritual life is... other people.

I have noticed that when I am triggered, I narrow myself to manage the emotion, and that to find peace I have to skilfully transform my anger into something useful. To do that I need to restore my sense of interconnectedness and expansiveness.

Sometimes though, if my anger creates a conflict with another, transforming anger isn't so simple. When I am in conflict with someone, it's difficult to be in my own skin. I am tense, and my testosterone levels rise, pushing me to say unhelpful and hurtful things. I can't sleep, too busy plotting how to defeat my opponent — as they deserve! This is troubling.

Then I remember, if I stop trying to win, the conflict may resolve in a wise agreement and a stronger relationship. It's mysterious this way. A conflict handled well changes unhealthy assumptions in relationships, like there has to be a winner and a loser, or a dominant party and a subordinate.

Psychologist Ken Reeves says that conflicts go through stages, four of them. Stage one, he says is the honeymoon, or pseudo-harmony stage. A harmony based on the participants ignoring their differences and being "happy." This stage can last from a few moments to lifetimes. This is the "peace at any price" stance to avoid conflict. The price of such "peace" can include anxiety, depression, and boredom, but it does avoid tension.

In the Zen story, the samurai expects stage one from the monk. A typical subordinate would bow to the samurai. The monk should offer a meek little homily about heaven and hell, and hope the samurai goes away.

Our monk did not, and moved the process to stage two, the pressure stage. At stage two the differences become apparent and cause discomfort, to which the participants respond by pressuring the other to change. The message is: "I am uncomfortable. You change." "I am in pain. You fix it." "You are wrong. Agree with me." The other often replies with, "Now I am uncomfortable. You change." As they pressure each other, put-downs, rage, violence, and even war occur at this stage.

The monk does stage two with his derision of the samurai: "I am uncomfortable with your smell, your armour. You change." The samurai does stage two as he prepares to smite the monk. "I am uncomfortable with your rudeness. You change by ceasing to live." At stage two differences fill the air, as do fear of our faults being exposed, and shame for being weak or wrong, or not smart enough. Defending ourselves keeps us wanting to win at all costs.

Some people think conflict consists only of stage two, and stay there for a long time. Ideally, though, stage two becomes tiring for, as the monk said, stage two is hell, war is hell, and matters do not improve despite vigorous applications of pressure.

The third stage is vulnerability and curiosity. Attempts to pressure the other to change have failed, so I give them up. I start talking about what is going on with me, such as my share of responsibility for the problem, and curiosity about the other. "How can I understand you better?" I can feel uncomfortable with this vulnerability, but relieved to end the back and forth attacks.

The monk shows himself at stage three by sitting vulnerable as the samurai raises his sword, and by telling the samurai, "This is hell." Our monk has great faith in stage three. The samurai shows himself at stage three when he views the monk with compassion and lowers his sword.

At stage three I take a risk to gain what I most want in life: to be myself and be close to someone else. I hope the eye beholding my vulnerability will look at me with acceptance, as did the samurai, lowering his sword and gazing at the monk. At stage three I no longer pressure my opponent to be who I want them to be, but look at them with acceptance, and listen to their truth. And if we both speak the truth that lives in our hearts, the walls that separate us disappear, a bridge spans our rift, we meet and move together to stage four: peace. Maybe I can do what I said last week. Sometimes even I listen to what I'm preaching.

Understanding our triggers helps because it can keep us from lashing out. Thich Nhat Hahn says, "If your house is on fire, the most urgent thing to do is to go back to yourself and put out the fire. Going after the other is like running after the arsonist while letting your house burn down."

Putting out your fire, says Thich Nhat Hanh begins by embracing your anger like you would your crying baby. Rumi says, delight in your anger:

This being human is a guesthouse. Every morning a new arrival.

A joy, a depression, a meanness, some momentary awareness comes as an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all!

Even if they are a crowd of sorrows,

who violently sweep your house

empty of its furniture,

still, treat each guest honourably.

*He may be clearing you out
for some new delight.
The dark thought, the shame, the malice.
meet them at the door laughing and invite them in. Be grateful for whatever comes.
because each has been sent
as a guide from beyond.*

Yes, we are all a guesthouse. Every morning a new arrival, some momentary awareness comes as an unexpected visitor. Welcome and entertain them all, especially anger, for we need our anger. As we skilfully air our grievance with our friends, family and colleagues, we transform the hell of a dominant/subordinate culture to a culture formed by collaboration and connection. Creating this camaraderie with those we live and work with, develops our capacity to do so in the larger systems of our lives. "We need our anger," says psychologist James Averill "to generate the moral outrage to motivate people to push for a more just society." You see people using their anger this way everywhere.

Martin Luther King said to an audience at Carnegie Hall in February 1968, "it is not enough for people to be angry." He recalled the life of WEB Dubois, and how Dubois had spent his life overcoming his anger in the hopes of finding peace. King said of Dubois that night, he did not content himself with hurling invectives for emotional release to only retreat into smug passive satisfaction. The supreme task for Dubois then and for us now is to organize and unite people so that their anger becomes a transforming force. May this be our practice here. A practice that moves us all towards justice and peace.

Let your anger teach you, guiding you to heaven.

Meditation / Conversation Starter:

- How angry are you?
- How are you making it useful?