



Auckland Unitarian Church
Love beyond belief

Privilege fuelled anger

Clay Nelson © 12 December 2021

In a recent opinion piece that engaged me, [Kevin Norquay wrote in Stuff](#),

Not long ago, I made someone VERY angry.

So angry that spit was flying out of his mouth, where it clung to his moustache in white blobs. So angry his face turned deep crimson. So angry, his hand signals resembled Tyson Fury punches.

Lucky for me, he was in his ute, and I was in my car, protruding out of a side street, where its nose had absorbed about two metres of his road. Indefensible really, as Mr Spittle communicated in his rage.

Later, he probably mentioned my idiocy to his mates. He probably still thinks of me from time to time, and clenches his fists. But was his anger appropriate for the level of inconvenience, given he was on his way in 10 seconds?

Right now, parts of New Zealand are like Mr Spittle. Rage is rampant. Anxiety abounding. Mere mention of words such as vaccine, mandate, MIQ, Māori, Aotearoa, lockdown, Three Waters and Jacinda can set up a tack-spitting frenzy.

In 2021, New Zealand is beset with more problems than a T-intersection standoff. Let's not list them here, let's try to get through at least one story without the word Covid in it ... oh, bugger, sorry.

We don't want divisions to rip us apart, yet that appears to be happening. It's as if the happier pre-pandemic days plastered over a deep unease, if the word "unease" is strong enough.

Trump banners at NZ protests don't bode well for a unified country, with Trump's USA built on disdain for experts and politicians – the very ones trying to outline a Kiwi path out of the pandemic.

Protesters have congregated on Parliament grounds in Wellington. Outside the Beehive we have protestors with a range of grievances they wish to be heard. Some worthy. Inside we have a prime minister who sees little merit in emerging to hear them, after being yelled at up and down the country for weeks.

Some recent social media feeds have been frankly terrifying, saying Jacinda would be “lynched” if she went to Auckland. When even doctors have been threatened at gunpoint, nothing can be ruled out. Nothing. Anger, fear and anxiety is grinding down Godzone.

Even if some of those outside Parliament did not reflect the vast bulk of New Zealanders, some did. They are part of a long list of those who allege their views are being ignored. Business owners, farmers, nurses, teachers for starters.

Protests are a perfectly valid and important way of expressing upset and level of annoyance, of indicating anxiety and demanding change. Provided they don't get violent, storm government buildings and cause deaths, as they did in Washington DC.

What is not fine is letting anger run amok, so that family, friends, or innocent others suffer. Biting a police officer – as happened in Northland this week – is a case in point. Biting is an act more commonly administered by a frightened animal.

Retail workers, medical professionals, epidemiologists, police, politicians, media figures who have encouraged vaccination, veterinarians and librarians even, have reported heightened levels of abuse as the future looks increasingly uncertain.

All professions on that list have a desire to help the public, to try to make New Zealand a better place. Yes, even journalists. Mass anxiety and its related bad behaviours are hurting the helpers.

Based on experience, asking people to try to be nicer, to try to control their emotions, to try to talk to those with views that differ, is to invite vitriol and personal attack.

Apparently not much has changed over the past 2000 years. In ancient Greece, in Athens there was a Great Plague in 430 BC. A person named Thucydides survived and recorded his observations.

[Katherine Kelaidis, a scholar of ancient Greece observes](#), *“Thucydides and his contemporaries did not believe that we are born good. We become good by choosing to do good. We become brave by choosing courage. We overcome the twin vices of self-interest and fear by actively rejecting them”*.

She tells us that he saw in the plague the way people behaved:

“For the violence of the calamity was such that men, not knowing where to turn, grew reckless of all law, human and divine.” And: *“Men who had hitherto concealed what they took pleasure in, now grew bolder.”*

Her observations caused me to muse on anger and how much of it is fuelled by privilege. We all get angry. If we don't think so we should schedule some time with a therapist. Everyone has felt antagonism towards someone or something we feel has deliberately done us wrong.

Anger can be a good thing. It can give us a way to express negative feelings, for example, or motivate us to find solutions to problems.

But excessive anger can cause problems. Increased blood pressure and other physical changes associated with anger make it difficult to think straight and harm our physical and mental health... and anger can divide a community or country.

Lots of things can evoke it. Some of my anger embarrasses me. This is when I have done something I consider stupid. Sometimes it is at someone who has humiliated me or said hurtful things and even then, my anger is also at myself for giving them the power to undermine my self-worth. Then there is anger at injustice. When I have been unjustly treated I know it immediately, not so much when others have been.

It is hard not to notice that a large proportion of the people I have seen on the news angrily marching and protesting vaccine mandates or having a vaccine at all are male and white. They have a strong sense of injustice when the rules don't favour them.

In one psychological study of white privilege, the researchers were taken on a visit to a slaving fort in Ghana, they were shown the original church on the property. At the entrance of the church was an opening that looked down into a pit that held slaves, so the faithful could survey their property as they entered and exited church services. This raises the question, what did the parishioners tell themselves as they sat in pews above recently enslaved human beings?

Today, we can marvel at the mental work necessary to literally walk over souls on your way to saving your own. But even in Aotearoa we still live in a society that bestows vast privileges on Pākehā that separate them from Māori and ethnic minorities. Compared with their Māori counterparts, Pākehā on average have vastly more wealth. This started with land theft and has continued through institutional racism and through inequitable education, health and justice systems designed by and for Pākehā. Yet, today many Pākehā — the ones who call talkback radio — believe that ethnic minorities enjoy racial privileges. This is easily ignited tinder for anger, for as Latin American actor Stephanie Herrera once observed *“When you're accustomed to privilege, equality can feel like oppression.”*

Lauren Currie OBE observed that “white privilege doesn’t mean your life hasn’t been hard, it means your skin tone isn’t one of the things making it harder! There’s plenty of other privileges (socio-economic, male, heterosexual, able-bodied) but white privilege is perhaps the most enduring throughout history.

“For most of us, our recent outrage due to the stress of a pandemic is a privilege.”

Today I’m inviting you to pause and ask yourself “Where does my anger come from?” If you’re like me, it’s likely to be from a place of relatively safe middle-class privilege. Ask yourself, who else is suffering? Who has been suffering this whole time and I didn’t notice? How does this affect them?

Perhaps by shifting our focus to them, our own anger will dissipate, swallowed up by our love, care and kindness for them, even Mr Spittle. As Thucydides observed, it is a choice to do so, but a good one. Good for ourselves. Good for others. Good for our country. Who knows, we might even let a car move out into traffic from a side street.

Meditation / Conversation Starter:

Where does your anger come from?

How does it blind you?

How could you use it for good?