

Yearning for God's reign, especially in our discomfort

That anger might make people feel uncomfortable, but listen to it. Use your emotions as fuel to work as hard as you can. That emotional energy indicates love for your church and your calling. It will sustain you.

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I was a solo pastor, still in my 20s and serving a rural congregation, when I attended a continuing education event at a seminary. A lecturer led us through a typical case study about a couple of older women who were blocking the ideas of the younger members in the church. I was in the midst of similar struggles in my own congregation, so I became passionate during the discussion: “I get so frustrated! They hired me to bring younger people into the church, and now that young people are there, they want to drive them out!” In the process, I realized that I was undermining the point of the lecture—which was to make sure that the established members received proper care.

During the break, I walked up to the lecturer so that I could apologize for contradicting him. Not that I felt terribly bad, but a professor/friend told me that I could be “scary” as a student. So, I wanted to assure him that I was friendly and on his side. I joined him in the coffee line and as soon as we had filled our mugs, I offered him my hand and my warmest smile. “Hi. I’m Carol. Sorry I got fired up in there. I really appreciate the discussion. It just struck a chord, you know?”

He looked at me, with his brow wrinkled into a scold, “You. *You* have deep anger issues. You need to do some serious work and get some professional help for your issues before you will ever be a good pastor!” He didn’t bother to take my offered hand.

I stepped back as if I had been slapped. I looked down to see my coffee trembling and I took a deep breath as I willed my fingers to stop shaking. I became aware of the blood pulsing through my veins, as I turned a shameful red. *He had known me as one out of thirty students for an hour. He might have heard three full sentences come out of my mouth. How could he assume so much about my psychological state, ministry, and pastoral effectiveness? Yet... could he be right?*

I clinched my mug and turned around. I skipped his next session and went on a walk, berating myself for being a horrible person and pastor. With each step, I tried to assess if what he said was true. Of course, I had spent several days, taking psychological examinations in preparation for ordination. There were no red flags there. I had grown up with abuse as a child, so I had been in therapy for years and would continue to sort that out for decades.

At my next therapy session, I did spend more time, unpacking my “anger issues.” Fortunately, I had a therapist who was also a feminist. She taught me that anger is

an acceptable emotion. She also explained how to spot a man who is uncomfortable with women's anger, even when (at the very same time) *he* is inappropriately lashing out at *her*.

Now that I have been the guest lecturer or adjunct professor at a number of seminaries, I know what it's like to be on the other side of the podium. I know the intimidation of standing in a space where I might be an expert, but I am not a Ph.D. There is a whole academic culture that I'm trying to prove myself in, yet I have no idea who the players are and I'm blind to the rules the games. I am well acquainted with that imposter syndrome that rears its ugly head.

I recognize now that I had unwittingly humiliated him. He was challenged, in a setting where his ego felt particularly vulnerable, so he wanted me to go away. Immediately. He accomplished his goal.

Although 20 years passed, I have found my memories drifting back to that tender scene. I have not been ruminating about that particular scolding all this time, but my emotional turmoil echoes that moment. I recognize those waves of anger, as I grieve the unhooded white supremacists, the "me too" stories, and the tax policy that guarantees even greater income inequality to come. I'm exhausted with that feeling that all the justice work we strived for is vanishing. It feels like the arc of the moral universe is doing a back bend. And in the midst of my fury, that voice slithers up, like a vile snake on Eden's tree, whispering, "You. *You* have deep anger issues. You need to do some serious work on your issues before you will *ever* be a good pastor!"

Then, I think about myself, as lecturer *and* student. And I imagine what that lecturer should have said to me. I imagine what I should say to a future student in a similar situation. It would be this: "Yes! You *are* passionate about this. That anger might make people feel uncomfortable, but listen to it. Use your emotions as fuel to read as much as you can. Dig deeper. Research more. Explore this issue in all of its facets. That emotional energy indicates love for your church and your calling. It will sustain you as you to write multiples books and countless articles."

As I enter into this Advent season, my passionate angry yearnings are strong. They are kicking inside me, with the force of Baby Jesus practicing karate on Mary's ribcage. And I pray that this time around, I will have the wisdom to use that fury for fuel. In this time, when we are longing for God's presence, I pray that we will all be able to recognize our callings, even in our most uncomfortable situations.