Dynamics of Prayer and Anger

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It was a late afternoon when frantic parishioners were clamouring at the front door of the rectory. There had been an automobile accident just three blocks from the church. By the time I approached the location, a large crowd of people had already encircled the scene of the accident. Still a half block away, I couldn't help but sense an eerie silence pervading the air. The scene had none of the usual circus atmosphere that characterizes spectator curiosity in face of such circumstances, with the din and shoving movements of people positioning themselves for a better look.

Upon arriving at the site I could see that although two demolished cars dominated the centre of the circled crowd at the intersection, all attention was riveted upon a woman holding a limp child tightly in her arms. She was moving about the inner circle of people stooping quickly here and there to pick up what looked like pieces of debris resulting from the fierce impact of the two cars. No one had the courage to intrude upon her business. A holy awe and respectful reverence pervaded the scene.

As it turned out, the woman was grasping the body of her dead son close to her bosom. She was stooping to pick up pieces of his head that had been scattered in the street from the furious impact of his body upon the pavement. In a desperate attempt to restore his life she was trying to put pieces of his head back together again. What else could a mother do? She had no time to think. The reactive panic of losing her only son compelled her to do this act of madness. Who could interfere?

Twenty minutes earlier she had been preparing her family's dinner when she realized there was no milk in the refrigerator. Her husband was not due home from work for another hour and she wanted to have everything ready for his arrival. Her two children were too young to stay alone in the house even for a few minutes. The daughter was only three years of age. The boy was two. She thought she could quickly run to a nearby corner store to pick up the milk but it was raining. She piled the two children in the back of the car.

As she crossed Howard Avenue, another car came speeding out of nowhere at a tremendous velocity. The driver was drunk. He slammed right into Beatrice's car and immediately the two children were catapulted through the back rear window. Miraculously the young girl survived but her brother was killed, his head having been smashed upon the street.

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I did not know Beatrice or her family. They were not members of our parish so I was surprised a day later when she requested a funeral liturgy for her son. She said she was a Catholic but with all of her obligations she was unable to attend church.

I stood in awe before the faith that gave this young, traumatized mother an inner peace of which I knew not, yet I discounted that inmost steadfastness as being rooted in her belief. Obviously her faith was partly responsible for that peace, but realistically and sympathetically I judged her to be fundamentally in a state of shock. I was convinced that her horror-struck condition was ultimately the source of her inner calm.

A few months after the funeral she came to the rectory with a gift—a ceramic likeness of the Holy Family that she had made in gratitude for the parish's comfort to her. Though still grieving she portrayed even a greater depth of that calm peacefulness that I can only describe as being more than human. It had to be characterized by some sort of divine origin; there is no other way I can explain it. Now, with the passage of time, I could no longer dismiss her peacefulness in terms of shock. The zombie-like glaze was no longer in her eyes; in fact they conveyed the distinct clearness of innocence.

To be truthful, she was a scandal to me. A scandal not in the sense of a mother who failed to grieve sufficiently for her dead child; she certainly bore a grief beyond words that would forever leave her heart an open wound. It was not that kind of scandal. It was her faith that scandalized me from the very moment she had asked to bury her child from the church. I would have thought she would despise God for letting this happen to her. And yet here she was finding comfort in the very One I was angry with for being in charge of a world where such horrible things happen.

Life is Unfair

In moments of honesty many of us may admit to having been angry with God from time to time. Perhaps for some of us there is even an ongoing disposition of smouldering anger not immediately present to our consciousness that belies a deep resentment that life is the way it is. We want life to be fair and it isn't. Not only that, we may have a subtle resentment that God is the way God is. We want God to be different. Just as the disciples wanted a Messiah who would fix things up, so too, we want a God who will fix up the world the way it should be—a place where the innocent have their reward.

G.K. Chesterton would make fun of us being the kind of people who criticize this world as if we were house-hunting, looking for some place to live of our own choosing.[1] We are not in that position. We belong to this world long before we begin to ask whether or not it's a nice place in which to live. As Martin Heidegger would say, we are 'thrown' into the world.[2] Like a person thrown into the water, we either sink or swim.

If we are going to swim we especially want life to be fair when

people are good and loving, doing all they can to make this a better world as they stand against the forces of evil. Social responsibility ought to count for something. And yet, so often, good people seem to suffer the most. It is bothersome to us. Books like *Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People?* are best sellers because we need some clues as to what is happening. We can't figure it out. We have an expectation that our God is going to be with us and yet too often he seems to be absent or at least inconsistent. If we get angry with each other when we're inconsistent, why can't we be angry with God for treating us this way?

I suppose many people are scandalized at the thought of being angry with God. It almost sound sacrilegious. Maybe it's just that we're afraid of God, that God may retaliate if we get too angry with the way things are. Then we would be in worse trouble than before. After all, that's what frequently happens in our dealings with one another. Anger escalates and we can be so wounded by each other's reactions that it seems easier just to swallow our anger rather than express it. If we get angry with someone, he or she may retaliate and we are afraid we will find the relationship destroyed rather than enhanced. Yet if our prayer calls us to be honest in all things, then we have to be honest about all of our emotions and feelings, no matter where they are directed.

Rationally we know life to be unfair. It will never be any different, but instinctually and in the depth of our hearts we want it to be fair, it ought to be fair. For some reason we cannot let go of that, we cannot surrender that irrational 'ought' about life. And because of that it is quite easy to get angry with God, the Author of it all. Why should we bother with a God who seems so distant, so aloof, so uncaring—so useless?

I remember some time ago watching an interview with Mary McCarthy, author of, among other things, *Memories of a Catholic Childhood*. During the interview she was asked if she was still a Catholic. 'No', she more or less responded, 'nor do I believe in God at all. Even if there was a God, I wouldn't want to spend an eternity with someone who plays such cruel games.'

Her words bring feelings about the 'uselessness' of God to a further dimension. Not only is God experienced as aloof but even irresponsible. We, too, can feel at times that life is a cruel game. Sometimes in the face of savage absurdity we may wish that we had the courage to just walk away from God, as did Mary McCarthy. But unfortunately, or, more accurately, fortunately, there are other witnesses to the dimensions of the human heart than just Mary McCarthy. There are people like Beatrice, believers, who partake more of God's compassion than the cruelty of the fates; who experience more love than indifference; who find comfort over bitterness and who taste an overwhelming presence of peace rather than the despair of absence. Beatrice is the kind of person whose heart is so spacious that she knows no bounds. She makes us think that our world must be too cramped, too small a place for the living God to dwell in.

People like Beatrice fill us with a holy fear; they scandalize us in that they continually respond to life's unfairness with love rather than hate, with peace rather than rage, with acceptance rather than bitterness. They live in such a way as to make us question the source of the strength implicitly communicated in their poise and bearing. They announce a love that is beyond the limits of egoic concerns and give witness to a radical surrender of heart that is beyond the realm of fatality. Despite every reason in the world to be like Mary McCarthy, people like Beatrice still believe and still love. It is the scandal of these 'unknown saints' that continually nurtures our own faith and fills our hearts with longing for the God of all creation. Their response of faith keeps us in the arena of faith, constantly calling us to purify our own self-pity lest our poor love never root within us in a lasting way. We long for a faith that sees through the illusion of this world. And yet, ironically, even our efforts to foster faith through prayer may only cause our anger with God to fester.

Prayer may open us up to all sorts of subtle, negative anger. Through it we may feel silent rage in the face of all those irreversible events in life that seem so senseless and cruel and which cause irreparable suffering to innocent and guilty people alike; events that arouse instinctual fear and anger within us, even unconsciously. In the face of deep suffering we often respond with a horror that stuns us as we realize there is little we can do to assuage it.

Prayer sensitizes us in very acute ways. It is a dangerous thing to fall into the hands of the living God who is goodness itself because we want to share in that goodness. Goodness and beauty are inviting; we really want to live life in their presence. We want to get off the sidelines and to participate. However, in the hands of the living God not only are we sensitized to the beauty and majesty of life but to its pain and suffering as well. That means we have to participate in both.

Dynamics of Anger

It might be helpful to define just what we mean by anger if it is so much a part of our lives. Anger is a normal, natural energy which when aroused within us can be used constructively or destructively. From a phenomenological point of view, anger is the experience of being blocked from having, doing or being what is important to us by someone or something that is unyielding. In anger we find ourselves 'bursting forth' to achieve what we desire.[3]

Erik Erikson's theory of developmental stages provides a useful tool for reflection on anger. Erikson maintains that we all progress through stages of development in the process of our human journey. At each stage there are certain polar tensions that need to be resolved. For example, the first stage is Basic Trust versus Basic Mistrust followed by Autonomy versus Shame and Doubt. It seems that the experience of anger falls within the tensions related to these first two stages of human growth.

The first stage issue of trust has to do with our openness to the world. This stage takes place in the first year of life. The infant has to learn if the world can be trusted. In a state of total dependency, the vulnerable infant cries out for the world to provide care and nourishment.

Erikson's concern with ego development revolves around the child's capacity for receptivity as it is formed through the process of consistent and predictable feeding patterns. As the child's trust develops that mother will return again even after she has gone out of sight, the child gains a growing sense that future needs will be met by reliable providers. Self-trust also develops. One learns how to cope with the give and take of life. If the basic experience of anger is facing inability, we recognise a direct correlation to our sense of vulnerability.

The first stage of dependency solidifies our perception that all throughout life, to some degree, we will be vulnerable people. We have needs and we ourselves cannot always be the source of satisfying those needs. Thus we look beyond us to the whole realm of our environment in order to have most of our needs fulfilled.

When an infant's need for food is not being met, the child will cry out. The child experiences an inability. That is anger or at least a part of anger. Anger is crying out for help when the inability of receiving nourishment is not met. The crying out will most often call the mother; at other times the crying out will receive no immediate response. The child has to learn through this experience whether or not he or she will be open to this world in a trusting manner or, instead, be suspicious of it.

As human beings we have enormous needs and desires. Many of them are outlined by Abraham Maslow as basic physiological, safety, acceptance, esteem and self-actualizing needs. If they are not met, if we face inability in achieving them, then we will be likely to find ourselves living in anger since we are not achieving what is of personal importance to us. 'Anger is the specific emotion linked to the deprivation of need satisfaction.'[4] In anger we cry out or burst forth to try and have our needs met.

It is at this point that Erikson's second stage of Autonomy versus Shame and Doubt comes into play. The existential value at this stage is the virtue of 'willing.' Erikson describes this movement 'from a passive, receptive infant to the beginnings of an autonomous child who is first able to control the bodily functions, and later things, people and events.'[5]

At the second stage of development the child is no longer in a horizontal position but is now in the vertical position of standing. In fact the child is taking a stand by learning that he/she can say 'No!' The child now experiences having a choice, which also means having the ability to say 'Yes!' If we do not successfully complete this stage we may become like people who find themselves in a constant state of ambivalence. We may never learn to fully participate in our world as straight-forward

decision makers, never really initiating, never really responding. 'The healthy ego for this stage of development is able to control both self and world to some extent and is able to call on this control for what is willed.'[6]

The purpose of choice is to learn how to have a certain control over our situation; to accept responsibility for actually shaping our world. Just as the young child at this stage of development builds upon trust, and grows in confidence of self and control of destiny, the adult learns to overcome doubt of self and enter into the world with a willingness to participate.

Adrian van Kaam refers to this second stage of taking a stand as being a willing person.[7] Not only are we open to reality as it is but we also have a willing readiness to bring our lives into harmony with the truth that is unveiled to us. Thus we 'burst forth' into the world in order to be in relationship with it.

In taking a stand, in 'bursting forth,' we will to pursue what we need. If the object of our desire is not available, if there is some blockage or inability, then we may become explosive. When our ordinary efforts at dialogue and reasoning fail to achieve the desired result, we may burst forth in an affective way in order to achieve what is necessary for our survival as judged by a deprivation of our basic needs. Our anger may then lead to assertive behaviour in order to achieve that which is of personal importance.

There are multiple levels to anger's potency and numerous possibilities for its expression. Anger may take on so many faces that we can become intimidated by its power and begin to repress it. Since our needs are expressed in specific situations they may easily come into conflict with the perceived needs of other people. We are not the only ones with needs. Other people in our environment are also taking a stand and bursting forth to achieve what they desire. Often enough our needs will clash with those of others.

If conflict becomes too strong for us we may be reduced to a spirit of will-lessness, refusing to actively engage and participate in the world. Such a stance can only lead to passive-aggressive behaviour, a behaviour that punishes in subtle ways. On the other hand, we may go to the opposite extreme and engage ourselves in the world in a willful way whereby we demand to win at all costs. In our behaviour we act like a bully who walks all over anyone who stands in the way. A balance between these two attitudes will find us to be willing persons who are open to all possibilities for achieving or adapting our needs while seeing that our neighbours' rights are assured as well.

Anger's power to harm can leave us so fearful of its unleashing that we may feel far more comfortable in repressing it than expressing it. Unfortunately repressing anger does not make it go away. Some theorists would say that we may even store up our anger in a 'slush fund' which eventually will explode in appropriate and misdirected ways.[8] Since our

anger will be present to us even without a focal awareness, it is of vital importance for us to learn to recognize and channel it creatively.

Dynamics of Prayer

From this point of view, prayer and anger have a lot in common since they both to some degree involve a crying out. Petitionary prayer reveals our fundamental honesty before God for, as Thomas Aquinas noted, it find us crying out the desires of our heart.[9] As the infant legitimately cries out for food , we too cry out and even burst forth to have our needs satisfied.

The awareness of inability is the crucial departure point in the experience of anger and it is the crucial point of departure for so much of our prayer. Since we can only pray from where we are, praying in anger is frequently the context of our petition. When we experience our own powerlessness to effect change through our bursting forth, quite naturally we expect God, who is on our side, will take over where we've left off. If the reality of our need remains unfulfilled, instinctually we may feel that God is somehow in collusion with whatever forces are keeping the obstacle in place.

Ironically, this unanswered petitionery prayer, rather than driving us further from God, may be an invitation into deeper union with the divine life. In confronting our image of God, we may come to find that the issue is not so much God being on our side as it is exploring the possibility that we have a distance yet to go before we are on the side of God. We may need to strip ourselves, empty ourselves, of the idolatrous divine image that we use to condone our functional, egoic plans for success. Through our failure and suffering and especially through confrontation with our illusions, we may come to know a different sort of God. This movement may reveal a deep, burning anger within us about life being the way it is and not the way we want it to be. It may require us to burst forth in anger from the shackles of our exalted expectations of self and God.

The unfairness of life is contextualized in the tragedies we and others experience. Yet however horrible these sufferings might be, however evil and outside of God's love they might dwell, they provide us with an opportunity to attend to the transcendent spirit within us. Through that spirit we may come to discover that we cannot rest in a self-contained assuredness that our lives are being mastered through our financial success, good health and egoic, ambitious plans for bettering our world and our individual lives. The contrast of our experience with our expectation thrusts upon us a horizon of disturbing mystery. What we expect from this life in the measurable, material realm is not what we can really hope in.

Sensitivity to what 'ought to be' in life helps to stimulate our outrage against the acts of injustice and cruelty perpetrated by the tyrants of history but it also challenges us to question the inconsistency

of our own lives and the cruelty of nature in and of itself. We are forced through tragedy to face the common illusion that we are in control of our own destinies. While we may act in outrage against the unfairness of this world and be motivated to create a new heaven and earth, we may not always succeed.

A gentle voice may also speak in the loud turbulence of tragedy, inviting us into the unknown. When our bursting forth in anger has done all that is possible to take a stand against the evil of this age, we may choke in bitter defeat or we may surrender to a truth that life and love always demand more from us than we could have imagined possible.

It is in the mystery of people like Beatrice, who somehow have so little expectation of life's fairness, that we come to be intrigued by the source of their love and belief. We long to experience that openness to all of life's facets which characterizes these anonymous saints. They seem to have a treasure that the world cannot take away and there is something in us that wants to possess it as well. Anthony de Mello relates the story of a man who is waiting for the holy prophet to arrive at his village. The villager had a dream that the prophet would give him a precious stone enabling him to become rich forever. On being asked for the stone, the prophet freely gives the villager a beautiful diamond, probably the largest in the world. The villager grabs it and runs away. But during the night something is disturbing him, he is unable to sleep, tossing and turning until the crack of dawn. Finally he gets up and runs to the prophet, saying 'Give me the wealth that makes it possible for you to give this diamond away so easily.'[10]

In giving away her son to the mystery of life and death, Beatrice is living within the heart of a reality that is not always pleasant to deal with. Although filled with terrible grief, she seems to be able to accept the tentativeness of this world of ours. So many of us spend a great deal of time and effort being perplexed by that tentativeness. Our energies are so often spent trying to gain a mastery over the realities that suffering, tragedy and death impose upon us that it seems almost blasphemous to surrender our efforts to overcome them.

Van Kaam identifies our attempts to live with a gentle openness to the reality of life as appreciative abandonment. He raises the basic question we all ask: Is this mystery of suffering meaningful and beneficial? Can we abandon our lives to this mysterious reality of life in any kind of seminal faith, hope and love?[11] We all have to answer this question in some fashion. We have to take a position on whether or not we trust life itself. In the same way we ask whether or not we are going to trust ourselves and whether or not we are going to trust God. Just as we may feel abandoned by our mothers in terms of our feeding patterns and our need for security, so, too, we may feel abandoned in this cosmos, as merely victims of fate.

If we are praying out of our experiences, we will find often enough that our own will clashes with the divine will, at least in the way we want

to be open to the world. We may will that nothing evil ever happen to the innocent, but our power to protect the innocent is very much lacking. That inability to make the world over into a better place causes frustration which leads to anger with the way things are.

The act of faith in abandoning ourselves to a God of love is for some people simply spontaneous. Undoubtedly surrender to life as good, holy and trustworthy is a graced gift. I would think that Beatrice has that kind of implicit, graced, spontaneous surrender as the characteristic of her heart. Others, and I would include myself here, we are not quite so trusting and tend to hedge their bets. As Jacob wrestled with God throughout the night, many of us will wrestle with God for years upon years. In all honesty, we will likely find anger growing within us because we are so distraught at our inability to really trust life and to really trust God. Ann and Barry Ulanov suggest that an ambivalence about God and about the way things are, the agony and ecstasy of it all, is really the root cause of our anger.[12] We want to believe but our experience makes it so difficult for us to really surrender in trust to a loving God. The ambivalence implies an inconsistency in the way that life is lived. It is the old story of whether or not we really trust our provider to return once he or she is out of the room.

Anger As A Gift

If anger is a part of our lives, what should we do with it? Actually we can use it. Our aggressive energies can help us to pray and to go on praying for the grace to set aside our doubt, to bracket our ambivalence, and to confront the evil that is subject to our control. We can fully enter into the second stage of anger shouting out our 'No!' to the injustices of the world that flow from the work of our own hands. We have the power to direct the anger that flows from our instinct when we feel threatened by the outside world, when we feel the world is not cooperating with us.

In this light, prayer motivates our anger and anger motivates our prayer. In prayer we can learn to take a stand so that we might turn with courage against, or burst forth against, whatever it is that causes us to cry out in the first place, whatever it is that impedes our individual and common good.

If we are open to changing a world in which young children are innocently and brutally victimized when adults drive while intoxicated, for example, we may use our anger to organize movements to stop drunk driving. The organization MAD, Mothers Against Drunk Driving, is an excellent example of the kind of response that cries out and takes a stand. Anger with the way things are, with the fallenness of the world, may motivate us to work to establish a just wage or protest against racial discrimination. We can work towards nuclear disarmament or housing for the homeless or food for the hungry. We can do what we can to reform the controllable aspects of our environment that lead to certain forms of suffering and tragedy.

Anger is a gift that belongs to each person because it is a potency that helps to maintain our sense of esteem as children of God with rights and privileges. In taking a stand for the reign of God we learn to work for justice, peace, mercy and love. When we face inability, our anger is aroused to change ourselves and our world.

As we open ourselves to the way life is and as we will to take a stand in the world, we will inevitably make mistakes. The one who loves much, however, will be forgiven much. At times the passion of our bursting forth will be offensive and even cruel, destructive and sinful. Our standing out in the world will open us to even further experiences of spontaneous episodes of anger because now, in taking a stand, we will be engaged in opposing viewpoints, facing inability all the more.

Anger is a gift. It is part of our instinctual, created nature. While we may pray for a spirit of complete openness and trust before all the horrors and tragedies of our common existence, it seems inevitable that now and again evil will overwhelm us and we will cry out in the face of our inability to stand before it. Without a burning anger, we might never learn what it means to really pray in petition. Anger is a gift. Anger, often enough, is the underlying motivation of our prayer.

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