

Reflection by Rachel Guaraldi
November 17, 2020
United Church of Strafford, Vermont

We invited Rachel Guaraldi to reflect as a chaplain and spiritual director on what we as a people need right now, after all we have been through in 2020, in order to nurture our spiritual, emotional, psychological and physical health. You can read about Rachel Guaraldi on her website: <http://www.rachelguaraldi.com/>

Below is the text of Rachel's compassionate, wise and practical guidance:

This month feels long. When I think back to Halloween, inventing ways to celebrate the holiday with my kids while still being safe this year, Halloween feels like a lifetime ago. That first week of November was a year unto itself—waiting and waiting and waiting to hear the results of the election. And then watching the COVID-19 numbers go up and up and up around the country.

It's November. Almost nine months into this pandemic. We've seen an explosion of awareness of the racism in our country. Hundreds of thousands of people of died. Our country continues to be politically divided. There has been and just is so much. It's been a long year.

We've all lost something. Some more than others. Some of us have lost jobs, lost childcare, lost financial security, lost opportunities, and lost freedoms. Some of us have lost people we love, lost the ability to say goodbye, and lost the ability to grieve collectively. Some of us have lost our own health, our communities of support, our hope in the world, and some of us have lost even our faith.

We as part of this country and as part of this world have experienced a collective trauma. We have experienced a huge amount of loss in a short period of time and our grief is largely disenfranchised grief, meaning an experience of loss that can't be fully acknowledged, socially held or publicly mourned—in this case because there is so much, and our society's and communities' capacity to process that loss is limited.

Many of you may be familiar with Elisabeth Kubler-Ross's "Stages of Grief" which in the grief counseling community is held with a grain of salt. Think of it as this, there are many many emotions that we feel when we experience a loss, and those many many emotions can roughly be fit into the categories of denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. Take those categories and throw them in a paper bag and every so often pick one out and then put it back. That's how grief works, its not linear or predictable, it just is. It's a mess.

It's a mess just like my children's artwork is a mess. It doesn't make sense. It doesn't follow the rules. It's not what any of us would do if we were in our right mind. Yet, at the end, the chaos is strangely beautiful and the process of making that chaotic art felt good. It felt good because we need to grieve. We need to express the emotions that we are having about this world and about this year.

One of those emotions, I'd like to talk about here is Anger. The Bible says a lot about anger. God is pretty angry in the Hebrew Scriptures and Jesus warns us about anger in the Christian Scriptures. The thing about anger is that anger isn't inherently bad. It's what you do with your anger that can be hurtful or helpful. Anger is a universal human experience and at its core, Anger is simply energy.

This energy, Anger, when experienced needs to be released. If we don't have a way to express our anger, a way to let it out, then our anger turns inward and begins to poison us. We become depressed, apathetic, and we lose our motivation, our passions, our energy to do things. When our anger is expressed outwardly towards another person, this can quickly turn to rage and be hurtful. One of the dangers of anger is that it feels good. Many of us have a lot of guilt around this, but it's true. It feels good to be angry at something or someone. Isn't that strange?

Right now we have a lot to be angry about. The various losses we are experiencing, the actions and inactions of the political environment of our country, the restrictions on our freedoms, the slowness in developing a vaccine, climate change, racism, unemployment.... The list goes on and on and on.

And with so much to be angry about, we have a choice. We can swallow that anger and become more depressed, apathetic and grumpy. We can lash out at our families, our kids, our neighbors, or our co-workers and vent that rage when we experience smaller things that make us angry. Or we can find a third way. This third way isn't easy my friends. I can't count how many times I've lost it at my kids this past year because someone dropped a book on my toe or one of them pushed the other off a chair. I've gotten angry at family members and friends and I've had to control some rage I've felt towards other people around me. I've also had deep moments of apathy and depression. And for every little thing, my emotions of anger and of loss aren't really about that one little thing, but about this whole year. Sometimes it feels like a flood pushing up against flood gates, waiting to burst through.

But if we as a community are going to heal our collective trauma and if we are going to with resilience walk forward into the coming future, we need to take responsibility for our anger. And there actually is a third way. So, I encourage you to join me in practicing. Anger is energy, and just like when you feel passionately angry about something you know is wrong, a righteous anger, and that anger fuels you to make change happen, anger of any form can be transformed and harnessed to give life rather than destroy it.

So take a moment with me. Close your eyes and take a few deep breaths. Spend a few moments thinking about all the things that have made you angry over the past year. The big things like the pandemic, racism, climate change, politics... and the little things, like stubbing your toe, a cake that didn't rise, losing your favorite face-mask on a hiking trail, the whining of your children. Feel the energy of that anger and let it fill you up. Feel it fill your body up with energy, from your heart space outwards to the tips of your fingers, toes and head. Feel the energy of that anger vibrate your body and awaken your senses. Ok, now take a few more deep breaths, feeling that fullness of energy. Then open your eyes and go do something. Rake leaves, stack wood, organize your button collection, cook dinner, clean your house, go for a run. Do something active, something that feels good in your body to move. Use the energy of your anger to make something, complete something, do something. Don't try to have a serious conversation or take a nap, no, use that energy to move. Let the energy of your anger out and find time regularly to do this. Because each time we transform our anger into something constructive rather than destructive, we widen our capacity, we empty our emotional reservoirs a bit, and we develop our resilience and we heal.