

Anger: A Motivating, Strengthening, Inspiring Force for Good

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Just focus on the good! That’s a phrase we hear so often amid today’s negativities. But in a year like 2020, how could we be expected to focus only on the good? Seriously, how many of us were genuinely pissed off that Baker stopped offering quesadillas last semester? And how many of us felt rage bubbling when our FedEx tracking read “arrives tomorrow” for weeks on end? But no; we’re told to focus on the good and ignore our anger...find a silver lining... whatever happened was meant to be, right?

I wouldn’t be surprised if 2020 took the superlative “angriest year ever.” As if a worldwide pandemic weren’t enough to make us boil over, add the eye-opening murder of George Floyd. Add the clash of opinions about protests. Add heightened emotions that divided families over which old white man would destroy the country next. All things we can’t—and shouldn’t—ignore.

I bring this issue of anger to you from the realization that I still have a lot to learn about harnessing it. On Thursday, I was blindsided by the news that I had tested positive for COVID-19 despite all my efforts to keep myself and my loved ones safe. Even though I’m thankful for Zoom, delivering this speech from a room in Baker Guest House instead of from Rosenberger’s stage is underwhelming and entirely frustrating. I’m still struggling to find a productive use for the anger I feel at COVID right now, but what I do know is that, according to psychologists, anger, when harnessed, can be a productive, creative tool.¹

By looking at how anger has motivated us individually, strengthened us communally, and inspired us globally, we can see how productive anger was essential to 2020’s most significant changes and how staying angry will push the limits on what we can accomplish next. There are so many examples of anger as a motivator in 2020. Maybe your anger at Styrofoam waste last semester challenged the ease of picking up Baker to-go boxes and motivated you to scrape your dinners into your own Tupperware. Or maybe you learned something new about yourself and your values in response to anger you felt in 2020.

This was the case for me. In 2020, I found myself, as I’m sure many of you did, spending a lot of time alone. This time allowed me to reflect on an anger of mine: the accepted view that gender is binary.

This anger at feeling like I fell just outside of what was expected of my assigned sex at birth, which I'd been keeping on the backburner for years, finally found itself at the forefront of my consciousness. Whether I liked it or not, I was forced to reckon with my own gender identity. This anger at society's "normal" motivated me to action in realizing that I refuse to see gender as either-or, and I refuse to identify in a way that assumes this either-or. For a while, my anger held me in a loop over feeling alienated within myself but not feeling bold enough to do anything about it. But when I finally confronted my anger, I discovered new things about myself and new ways to advocate for myself.

Not only does anger motivate us individually and drive us to be better, but it can also produce communal changes that strengthen our communities and bond us with others.

One stark example of how a community bonded and changed through anger can be found right here. On June 26th, 2020, the Juniata community was forced to react to an anonymous, racist, LGBTQ-phobic, ableist email signed a "concerned Juniatian." The anger sparked by this email was not a new anger felt on campus. Juniata seniors have seen at least one public racist or anti-Semitic act happen at this institution every year we've paid tuition here. That's taken a toll on us. Made us angrier and angrier each time we got an email from the Juniata administration containing the words: "this will not be tolerated here," when, clearly, it will.

In the world of strong minds and loud voices that is Juniata Twitter, the days that followed that email will be remembered as a time when we coped by sharing our experiences with those who have had similar ones. This use of social media fascinated me so much that it has become a part of my senior thesis. What I've found is that over 100 angry Juniatians used their anger to strengthen our community online during a time when we could not be physically together.

I know *my* parents believe social media is rotting my brain--and maybe it is--but research also suggests that sharing emotions like anger in an online space is how some social movements come to be.²

In addition to bonding us together, the anger we felt as a community brought about some pretty big changes. We saw brave students draft a Diversity Recommendations List and start petitions to implement these recommendations on campus. We saw students use their words, talents, and skills to organize protests, produce speeches, and petition the administration to change so that we could become a better community. Juniata still has a long way to go, but the anger that students have continues to strengthen us and bring about meaningful change. I mean, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said it best: "the supreme task is to organize and unite people so that their anger becomes a transforming force."³

We've seen how anger can motivate us individually and how anger can strengthen our communities, but anger can also inspire us on a global level.

The COVID-19 pandemic was something that seemed to underlie our every action in 2020, no matter where in the world we were. Whether you were frustrated every day because it was unsafe to hug your family and friends or because you couldn't hold the hands of your loved ones as they passed, this disease altered our world. As I struggle with my recent positive COVID result, it's bittersweet and oddly comforting to know that there are people on campus and *all over the world* experiencing exactly what I am going through and who are *just* as angry as I am. Collective feelings, even of anger, have the potential to inspire empathy among people who may not have anything *but* that anger in common with each other.

Just like Juniata's communal anger, global anger also brought about change, just on a larger scale. On Saturday, Johnson & Johnson's COVID vaccine became the third to be developed and authorized in record time. According to the Centers for Disease Control, two more are in phase three of their clinical trials. The urgency at which these vaccines were developed was inspired in part by our shared anger, held globally. COVID also inspired new means of spreading public health knowledge. For the first time in my life, I saw friends sharing information about public health practices, like handwashing or wearing masks, like the one I wear now. In 2020, we witnessed more innovation in science and medicine and more compassion among people—more empathy.

So how are we doing? Our pig roast, Liberal Arts Symposium, and sports seasons were cancelled. We missed graduations, weddings, memorials. Some of us haven't seen our parents or grandparents in over a year. In 2020, we watched as our systems failed us and we protested in the streets. We felt disease and isolation touch our lives in unprecedented ways. What we need to remember through all this residual anger is that we are not alone. We can use this anger, just as we did in 2020, to motivate us to action, to strengthen our communities, and inspire empathy around the globe.

Tonight, you're going to hear a lot of stories that remind you of all the reasons you were angry in 2020. Some of my peers are going to dredge up memories that make you feel anger you didn't realize you had. The time to deal with it is NOW. Take all the anger you felt in 2020 and let yourself feel it. Push your anger into productivity and let it motivate *you* to stand with *others* to change the world.

NOTES

1. Margarita Tartakovsky, "How to Channel Your Anger into Productive Action," *Psych Central* (blog), October 7, 2019, <https://psychcentral.com/blog/how-to-channel-your-anger-into-productive-action>.
2. James M. Jasper, "The Emotions of Protest: Affective and Reactive Emotions in and around Social Movements," *Sociological Forum* 13 (1998): 397–424.

3. David Adams, “Anger vs. Fear and Pessimism,” in *Psychology for Peace Activists* (New Haven, CT: Advocate Press, 1995), pp. 10-12, <https://www.culture-of-peace.info/ppa/chapter4-10.html>.