



My daughter Liv just turned one in January. Her speech is just starting to develop—she babbles with sentences that almost resemble real words, but not quite. That doesn't really stop her from having full conversations, complete with hand gestures. My spouse and I have recently become aware that she knows exactly what we are saying. We share our household with two cats and a big 80 pound Border collie/ Shepherd mix named Luca. He's a wonderful dog, but he's a bit excitable, shall we say. He needs a lot of exercise, and when it rains, he gets restless when he's cooped up indoors, like any of us do. To get out some of his energy, he's taken up a hobby of barking—namely at coyotes in the wilderness area next to our house. We do, admittedly, get frustrated with Luca when he's barking out of control and refuses to come inside. The other morning as Luca was barking at the door to go out, she started shouting at him in her baby babble, and wildly waving her hands. Whether she knows it or not, we know it—she is already learning from us what people do and how people sound when they are angry.

Toddlers are notoriously emotional creatures, roaring with joy in one minute and in a muddle of tears the next. As children we learn our emotional habits by observing the patterns of the adults in our lives. We learn that anger is both an internal feeling that we have—a physical emotion experienced in our bodies—but also an outward set of responses. Liv was not feeling the anger that we felt when we were yelling at the dog, but she had already learned how her parents act when we are angry, and was mimicking our response just the same.

Anger is a natural human emotion which arises within our bodies as a kind of internal alarm system. Some of us have alarm systems which are hyper sensitive, and others of us have alarm systems which are slower to activate, but all of us feel anger in some form or another. Our anger alerts us that something is wrong—an important boundary has been crossed or commitment has been violated. We can feel a physical response of anger



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triggered in our body when we have a need, demand or desire, unexpressed or expressed, that isn't met. Our face can get hot, our chest tightens, and our mind becomes laser focused on the issue.

Our anger can be justified and righteous, like the anger we feel at the specter of injustice that is racism or homophobia. It can be petty and selfish, when we don't get our way. It can come from a place of hurt when our egos are wounded. Whatever sparks it, our anger lets us know that there is a problem that needs to be solved, requiring our immediate attention. Unfortunately, anger isn't the best problem solver. A Tibetan Proverb says "Using anger to solve a problem is like grabbing a red-hot coal to throw at the other person." We need skills to defuse the anger alarm system and make sure our anger alarm system's response is set appropriately for the situation.

[New research on mindfulness](#) is showing that mindfulness practice can help us to control our reactions to situations. Practicing mindfulness meditation every day, for even ten minutes, helps us to be more aware of our emotions and to be less likely to react to them. Meditation does not erase our anger or dull our emotions, it rather sharpens our ability to understand them a place of reason and values rather than emotion. In their book [the Cow in the Parking Lot: A Zen Approach to Anger](#), Buddhist authors Leonard Scheff and Susan Edmiston wisely write: "Change comes, not by struggling to change or by fighting or disciplining oneself, but by becoming aware of what we are feeling and how we habitually act." People who meditate and practice mindfulness are not less likely to be angry, they are just more likely to know how to turn off their alarm system when it is activated, and to offer a response rooted in compassion rather than reaction.

Mindfulness teacher Gil Fronsdal talks about this in a [teaching about emotions](#): An important part of mindfulness practice is investigating our relationships to our feelings. The Buddha once asked, "If a person is struck by an arrow, is that painful?" Yes. The Buddha then



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asked, "If the person is struck by a second arrow, is that even more painful?" Of course. He went on to say, that as long as we are alive, we will have feelings - the first arrow. Often the significant suffering associated with a feeling is not the emotion itself, but the way we relate to it. If we condemn, judge, hate, or deny the first arrow, that is like being struck by a second arrow. The second arrow is optional, and mindfulness helps us avoid it. The more aware and familiar we are with our reactions, the easier it will be to have, for example, uncomplicated grief or straightforward joy, not mixed up with the second arrows of guilt, anger, remorse, embarrassment, or judgement. Emotional maturity comes, not from the absence of emotions, but from seeing them clearly.

Last week, we had an amazing opportunity put in front of us to mindfully approach our anger as a spiritual community. Our campus received a lot of attention when hate came to town in the form of the Westboro Baptist Church. We received interest from hundreds of people who wanted to "storm the campus" against the hate group. One person asked if they could come and throw tomatoes, and another couldn't wait to go toe to toe with the protesters. With Sequoyah high school, Fair Oaks preschool, local law enforcement, our members and trusted advisors, we discussed the response that would most align with our values. We decided that to mount a counter protest meeting anger with anger would not amplify our message of love, it would in fact provoke the group more and provide the kind of attention that Westboro was seeking. The group uses liberal and progressive anger as fuel for their own hateful rage, and we could easily fall into a trap. So on Sunday, we held a peacekeeping training, led expertly by Justice and Inclusion Coordinator Luis Sierra Campos. 60 angry people filled the room, wanting to show up in the morning and to face off with hate. Luis prepared the group by listening to the messages of hate we might hear, and processed our feelings of rage and anger, and the deep sadness underneath that people could actually carry so much hate and direct it towards our young people. When the morning came, the people who decided to come as peacekeepers were joyfully focused



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on our message of love and welcome for the students and building peaceful community amongst our networks.

One of the ways we stand out as a community of faith is in our reactions to what angers us, and how we channel that anger. Our anger makes us human, but if we are controlled by it we lose touch with humanity—our own and the others. What sets us apart from simply being an activist group is how we spiritually respond to the crises and chaos of our times with a mindful, reasoned approach, grounded in our values and nonviolent spiritual practice. In short, we have to be the peace we wish to see.

Each of us can take up a mindfulness practice in our own way. It could be simply starting a five minute mindfulness practice in the morning, where you sit quietly in silence before your day begins. It could be a mindful eating practice, where you take the time for gratitude and to really savor your food as an experience of nourishment. This month, I encourage you to find a mindfulness practice that is calling to you. March is known for its weather that famously comes “in like a lion, and out like a lamb.” It begins with tempestuous storms, which then bring the beauty of the spring time. So friends, invite you into March mindfully, tackling the lions in your life, and welcoming in the lambs.

Blessed be and Amen.