

American Anger, 2018

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The anger that inspired this essay a little over a year ago has sadly increased. It has been hard to watch this escalation and even harder to lead students through civil conversations about a world so full of tumult and pain. But, it's the job, and it may be more important than ever.

It's morning in America...somewhere. Still morning, technically, on the West Coast where I'm sure there is sun, but here in the gray mid-winter of a Kansas mid-afternoon, there is no sun and no warmth.

My students, Advanced Placement juniors, are writing about Carrie Chapman Catt's 1902 speech to the National American Woman Suffrage Association¹, and, earlier, my Advanced Placement seniors debated the desire for connection and a shared humanity in Colum McCann's exceptional 2009 novel, *Let the Great World Spin*. I am a high school English teacher, and these assignments that ask my student to think, analyze, criticize, and wonder are lately all I have to offer a world that feels, increasingly, to have gone mad.

We are angry in America at the start of 2018. Not even 100 years since women won the right to vote, just over 150 years since the end of the Civil War, still 58 years shy of our 300th anniversary as a nation, and we are angry. More and more with each passing day, we are angry at each other, at ourselves, at our government, at our enemies. At times, we are even angry at our friends. There has to be some reason for this unbridled anger that rides out between us, across the plains, into valleys, through city streets, under bridges, over mountains. There has to be a reason. Otherwise, all this ire is bound to burn beyond our control until we're left with nothing but ash and regret.

When I was in the third grade, I called my teacher a bitch. A bouffant-haired hardass whose only fault was wanting her under-nine charges to grow up to be good people with a strong work ethic, she did not deserve my criticism. As a teacher myself, I know that now. But, at eight-years-old, I was hell bent on being praised for something I did well, often better than my peers, which was spelling. I could spell just about any word put in front of me. What I couldn't do—and that list is long—was legibly write in cursive. So, my teacher made me take home 13 consecutive spelling tests, not because I'd misspelled a single word, but because my handwriting was atrocious. This was 1984, and penmanship was still taught in grade school classrooms.

Calling my teacher a bitch wasn't a surprise; I was an angry kid. I had a fierce sense of injustice and didn't like to see anyone mistreated. Walking the three blocks home from school each day, I yelled at the older boys who heckled my little brother and me, convinced their age and size were no match for my volume and outrage. And, my parents fought sometimes, as most parents do, and I worried, as most kids do, that somehow it was my fault. I was angry at those latchkey bullies, angry I couldn't stop my parents from fighting, and you can bet your ass I was angry about those spelling tests.

My punishment for calling my teacher a bad name was to speak with our elementary school counselor. I remember him as a tall man with a well-kempt beard, glasses, and a bald spot, but all of that could be wrong because he had one distinct characteristic that blurs the rest of him when I turn my mind back to his office. He had a therapy puppet, a dolphin named Duso, that I spoke to each time I went to talk about my anger issues. While I don't recall those conversations in the slightest, I remember Duso perfectly. He was quiet. He asked questions. He gave me somewhere to look besides into the face of an adult I didn't know. He made me feel safe enough to say what was bothering me. Years later, after my divorce from my first husband, I remembered that feeling of

safety. It was like a thing buried deep in the ground that I had forgotten until I walked into my therapist's office in 2012. As I cried, trying to choke out what was wrong, that buried thing began to burrow up, shedding layers of dirt and grime, until there it was in front of me: a small, green thing giving me permission to breathe again.

Though my story is singular, the anger within it is not. That kind of anger, that rage that has nowhere to go, is a part of our American identity. It's in our literature and the foundations of this country, and it is something our students need to learn how to negotiate.

My juniors, reading Carrie Chapman Catt, discovered her argument for women's independence and for the breaking of ties to fathers and governments that would view women as lesser. She wanted to shatter the notion that women had to be obedient because it implied men were to be obeyed, and not all men can lead, just as not all women are born to serve. What Catt knew about anger could power a small city. By the time she delivered her speech to NAWSA in 1902, she had been working for women's suffrage for nearly twenty years; it would be another eighteen before the 19th amendment was passed. Her opposition wasn't solely male; there were plenty of women who wished her silent. Women who were comfortable being relegated to the role of the domestic, and women who didn't want more than what their husbands allowed saw Catt as a nuisance at best or, worse, a threat. Then, as now, women shuttered each other as often as we raised each other up. I can't say I know for certain she ever called someone a bitch, but I'd bet even money she had occasion to want to. She watched her competent, intelligent mother stay home and stay silent while her father exercised his right to vote. She lost her first husband to an untimely death by way of typhoid. And, within six years, she also lost her mother, her dear brother, and her friend and fellow suffragette Susan B. Anthony. She had reason to be angry.

Around the time of the publication of *Let the Great World Spin*, Colum McCann was interviewed about, in part, his inspiration for the novel². The title comes from a poem by Alfred Lord Tennyson, "Locksley Hall," but a more personal story drives the narrative. On September 11, 2001, McCann's father-in-law was in the north tower of the World Trade Center on the 59th floor. He was able to get out, and he walked all the way Uptown, to 71st street, into the arms of his granddaughter. On that day, fear and anger held this country hostage in a way we had not felt before. We huddled in doorways in New York City and in apartments in Kansas, terrified of what would happen next. McCann's novel could easily have taken that road, the exploration of tragedy and fear against an ever-changing skyline; instead, his book illuminates the need for empathy and connection in an isolated age and is, I dare say, more relevant now than when first published in 2009. Set in 1974, the book is a tapestry of poverty and wealth, Vietnam and the start of the internet age, prostitution and what it means to be an artist, the deep skepticism at the heart of all true faith, of hope, and, of course, anger. One might assume a book written in response to 9/11 would be filled with reasons for anger, but it isn't. It is, rather, a treatise on how to love each other. We are to do it openly. We are to do it honestly. And, above all, we are to do it completely. We are to love everyone and anyone we can, each and every day.

This is the focus of my classroom and my teaching philosophy. I believe there is no better way to show someone you love them than to teach them. Sometimes, those lessons are about sentence structure and word choice. Often, they are not. In English classrooms we're dealing with text as a gate to the messy stuff of life: what it means to be human and how to survive it. Knowing how to manage anger, then, is central to my teaching.

America has been in an arrested state of grieving since 9/11. We haven't processed trauma the way we should: quietly, personally, in places that makes us feel safe. Those born between 1970 and 1990 hadn't fully experienced our country at war until 9/11, the Gulf War having been so short-lived that for some of us it barely felt real. We were innocent enough to believe the lie of American exceptionalism, and we were fragile enough to be broken by the realization of its falsehood. We

stayed out until the streetlights came on as kids and didn't think about being in constant contact with our parents because cell-phones didn't exist yet. Besides, who really wanted to?

Our anger today is rooted in our choice, collectively, to retreat into the faux-safety of the digital world rather than engage with one another. We hide behind the screens of protection, somehow thinking if we never allow ourselves to get too close to anyone, we can't be hurt, all the while becoming enraged at the people on the other side of the screen, people, often, we don't even know. Our unprocessed trauma, coupled with technological advancements that eliminate the need to ever speak to or physically interact with an actual human being, has driven American emotion underground. The spiraling rage on Twitter isn't real emotion. It's performance parading as catharsis, and it isn't helping anyone. When we take to social media platforms to air our grievances, we aren't attempting to connect to someone who may disagree in any meaningful way. We aren't hoping to find common ground in an increasingly isolationist culture, and we certainly aren't trying to figure out how to love anyone, except for, maybe, ourselves. Because, when we post about how fed up we are, how appalled, how irate, what we really want is affirmation. We want people to agree with us, to validate our statements, to "like" and "favorite" us so we can feel part of something. We want an escape from the void. But, we're constantly entering it. As we sit behind screens, we are increasingly angry and increasingly alone.

Ironically, anger isn't the enemy, and it isn't even, really, the problem. Anger may arise from pain, from sadness, from risking vulnerability only to be rejected. None of those are problems. Pain is proof of living. Sadness is proof of caring. Rejection means you were brave enough to be vulnerable in the first place. While living, caring, and vulnerability may all lead to anger, anger can lead to action, and action can lead to change. If we want change, we have to live boldly enough that we risk pain, to care deeply enough that we risk sadness, and to be vulnerable enough that we risk rejection. All of that starts with engaging not only with other people but with ourselves. Reaching out for a friend or neighbor or stranger—instead of a phone—can foster this engagement. Sitting in silence, or walking in the woods, or breaking down and crying can be ways of engaging. We have to relearn how to engage with all of our emotions, even anger, or we risk forgetting what it was like to ever really feel anything. And, we have to teach our students to do this.

As teachers of English, we can't help but be deeply attached to emotion. It's in how we feel about our students, about our content, and about our careers. We stand up for teacher rights in capital buildings; we stand up to administrations for our students; we stand up in front of classrooms every day and try to lead by example even when—especially when—we are angry.

What I'm trying to teach my students is that there is a time to be enraged, and there is also a time to engage. There is a time to think and to analyze and to criticize, and there is a time to act, to feel, and to change. There is a time to love and a time to breathe. A time for every purpose—or dolphin puppet—under heaven.

References

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Author Biography

Shannon Carriger has taught English in Kansas for over fifteen years; she currently teaches at Gardner Edgerton High School. She has taught for Kansas State University, Washburn University, Ottawa University, and University of Kansas. Carriger ran a Kansas Volunteer Commission arts

grant with the Lawrence Arts Center in 2010 focusing on social justice which culminated in a staged reading of the Franz Wedekind play *Spring Awakening*. In 2015, Carriger was a Flint Hills Writing Project Fellow and became a National Writing Project Teacher Consultant; in 2018 she graded AP English Language and Composition exams in Tampa, FL. Carriger's creative and academic work has appeared in a variety of publications including *The Midwest Quarterly*, *Inscape*, and *Blood Lotus*. She lives in Ottawa, KS with her poet-professor husband Michael and their dog Zelda. She can be reached at skcarriger@gmail.com.