

Overcoming the culture of nice

by [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

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Standing in a friend and former professor's kitchen, I was complaining. Mid-rant, I said, "I don't want to be a pain, but..."

And he stopped me midsentence. "Yes. Yes, you do," he smiled. "You want to be a pain. You don't know that about yourself, Carol? Because everybody else knows that about you."

I was *shocked*. Not over the fact that he would say it (we're good enough friends that we're way past the niceties). I was shocked because it was true, and I *didn't* know it.

You see, I grew up as a good evangelical girl, and nice was a very high priority. The highest, I think. I was told to smile and submit, with all sincerity. But one of the greatest things to ever happen to me was reading feminist theologians who extolled the virtues of getting angry. From the [Dictionary of Feminist Theology](#):

Anger is recognized as a way of experiencing our embodied energy as women. It is a body-centered response to our total environments....

Oppression or domination may be seen as a condition that prevents us from fully experiencing our anger. Feminists recognize that abuse deprives us of the ability to read body signals fully and gain awareness that unjust power is being directed against us.... Discerning and processing anger is a basic aspect of "salvo" or healing....

In the face of human suffering and the loss of real good that evil entails, we should be angry.... Feminists increasingly see that failure to express anger to God, as when we fail to express it to each other, distorts our piety and makes it a sanctimonious and brittle spirituality of denial.

Anger is a core emotion (as [Pixar](#) taught us). [Experiencing anger, on a gut-level, may be unpleasant at first, but it can lead us to release and clarity.](#)

We see the sanctimonious spirituality of denial all the time. When someone posts a deep and difficult problem on Facebook, we watch the stream of trite responses and saccharine memes. We shake our heads as people shame “Black Lives Matter” protestors for demanding justice. We sit back as women who grew up the same way that I did, turn to gossip, as the only way to express grievances. We know that [some women are overmedicated](#). I have an embodied response when I’m not processing my anger: my eye begins to twitch.

Now that I’m part of a denominational church, I have learned to get angry. We don’t have the same ideas of submission for women. Instead, we have a culture of nice that can allow bullies to flourish. I have watched as this culture has permitted certain people to take over a church in order to avoid conflict. Then the organization starts to placate that person, and even asks the person who stands up to the bully to sit down, in order to maintain peace. This dynamic can and does kill churches.

Conflict is really uncomfortable. No one likes that visceral anger, but it is often necessary in order to have a deeper peace. And so, I have learned to embrace that part of me that's not always nice.