

## Playing with the Fire of Anger

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### On Anger

Depending on our gender, religion, family culture and other social position, we get many conflicting messages about anger. I have absorbed many conflicting messages about anger and I have been confused. My family history and personal experiences with anger have been unpleasant enough to give me sympathy for anger's subtlest and most persistent critics, including feminist philosopher Martha Nussbaum and the greater part of the Buddhist tradition.

But no one has all the answers. And often being too sure about the answers we think we know is the biggest mistake we can make. One way or the other, we have to get on with it; every day we make choices based on the best understanding we have. The data will never all be in, the analysis never concluded, but meanwhile we have got to decide how to live.

In that spirit, taking it that *revisable knowledge is the only knowledge we have*, can ever have, I offer some thoughts:

We have a right to be angry; we have a right to all our feelings. Anger is *natural*, so *everyone* feels it sometimes. *The Gospel According to Mark* says, that Jesus drove out moneychangers out of the temple, overturning their tables; he didn't nicely ask them to pack up. Muhammad was furious when he heard that prayer leaders were keeping services going too long.

So there is no shame in feeling angry, exactly as there is no shame in sexual desire. Feeling anger, which rises in our mind-body, is quite distinct from holding onto anger, nursing a grudge, which IS a choice even when we do not acknowledge it as such. And anger is also very different from aggression, which is an explicit choice to hurt, usually made in anger.

Unless we really want to keep feeling angry--which we might--we should *try not to feed anger by recycling the mental stories that keep it burning*. You know what I mean. How that person did such and such and how they must have known the harm they would cause, etc. The Dalai Lama was asked if he feels angry when he hears about human rights abuses in Tibet: He said, "Sometimes I do, . . . but it very quickly changes into compassion."

Also: *There is never a duty, a moral obligation, to get angry*. Obligations have to do with actions, not emotions. On the one hand, anger can be a sign--to ourselves and others--that we care . . . Display of anger can be virtue signaling, a display of concern. Some people are convinced that is impossible to care sufficiently for justice without outrage at injustice. For example, counselor Doris Moreland Jones says that to be angry is to care tremendously, showing that your caring goes beyond polite conversation, and that you are willing to risk confrontation.

And environmental activist Edward Abbey says that love implies anger. "The man who is angered about nothing cares about nothing."

But: others assure us that it is clearly possible to act with care, to work for justice, without relying on anger. Two great liberators of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Mohanda K. Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. shunned anger. MLK said that we must be willing to suffer the anger of others and yet not return anger. Because: anger will paralyze us and prevent us from doing anything constructive.

We know that a flash of anger gives us an energy surge; it primes us for fast reactions, which might be needed. It can also give crucial intelligence, forcing us to be aware of a violation. So in these ways, anger seems not only natural, but a valuable adaptation. And if we *are* going to have it, we should figure out

how to use it well, not allow it to use us. In her book *The Case for Rage*, philosopher Myisha Cherry speaks of “anger management” *not* as minimizing or suppressing anger, but rather learning to use its energy for good. In this, she is mainly inspired by the feminist Audre Lorde.

In a famous speech called “The Uses of Anger,” Audre Lorde says, “My response to racism is anger. I have lived with that anger, . . . learning to use it . . . *fear* of anger taught me nothing. . . . Every woman has a well-stocked arsenal of anger potentially useful against those oppressions, personal and institutional, which brought that anger into being. Focused with precision it can become a powerful source of energy serving progress and change. Anger . . . translated into action in the service of our . . . our future is a liberating and strengthening, clarifying . . . Anger is loaded with information and energy.”

On other hand, as MLK suggests, anger often impairs our judgment about the best choice of *effective* or *constructive* action that is consistent with our values. We all know that anger leads us to make choices we regret, maybe some choices that we will regret for the rest of our lives. Most types of anger include an “action disposition” toward harming another person. Author Toni Morrison is onboard with MLK on this, saying she “has no use for anger at all”: “People think anger is interesting, passionate, and igniting – I don’t think it’s any of that – it’s helpless because it involves a loss of control--and I need all of my skills, all of the control, all of my powers.

Our predilection to fury leaves us vulnerable to exploitation. The media, social media notoriously, but other media as well, exploit and monetize our anger—fueling it and feeding off it. We could call it hate-bait. Or rage-porn. The entire business model of social media depends on keeping eyeballs and anger is the best way to do that. Facebook’s algorithm generates more and more divisive content in order to gain user attention and increase time on the platform. Cable news is even more polarizing; they choose and construct stories to provoke outrage and they *never* pretend otherwise; they actually tease upcoming stories by telling you just how furious the next story is going to make you. OOH, this one is going to REALLY piss you off, tune in! Outrage sells because it seems that we enjoy rage-juice and the sense of righteousness it gives us; it is literally an addictive drug. Our commercial information ecosystem is designed to provoke us, to sell us the rage-juice we can’t help craving. Talk radio host Alex Jones claims to have a brand as big as Coca Cola—based entirely around outrageous lies. And that is one guy. The rage-making industry is worth trillions of dollars. *This* is where we live.

And just like the media, politicians know that outrage is the *best* fundraiser. It doesn’t matter whether something is true or false; they say anything that will get us donating. Recently for Michigan Republicans, it was the lie that public schools put out litter boxes for children who identify as cats. And for us: What about this, the new dress code *just for women* in the Missouri state legislature—they are now required to wear a jacket, such as a blazer or cardigan? That *is* true. And how outrageous is that? Well, maybe not so thrillingly outrageous when you consider there has always been a similar or stricter dress code for men, a code written when there were no women in the legislature (which is now about 30% women). But the story generates more revenue (from us) without that context!

And then there is the worst of it: war. Even now, humans who wake up ready to machine-gun each other are a very small minority. So how are armies going to get the needed machine gunners? Stories about Guantanamo and American drone strikes fire up suicide bombers and the suicide bombings inspire Americans to water-board. In fact, there is no war where the leaders do not *create outrage* via narratives about the horribleness of the enemy. This is much more fundamental to war than weapons because it is the only way to create an intense action disposition to kill. Stories about torture by Russians fire up the Ukrainians who are bombed by Russians in part because of stories that Ukraine is full of Nazis. There is a difference between true and false stories, but rage-driven behavior will never find it.

Science tells us that prolonged or extreme anger can make us sick. Holding on to anger, holding grudges, is unhealthy because when anger persists for days or weeks, it compromises our neurohormonal and cardiovascular systems. If we live our lives marinating in rage chemicals, our lives will be shorter and more miserable than they might have been.

Hey, maybe it's just me, but sometimes I think, "Trump really makes me angry," but I know that is inaccurate and unwise. Unless they guy put an electrode into my brain, no one can MAKE me have this or that emotion.

Also, I try to remember not to say, "I am so angry." No one IS anger. You are a person, anger is not. Don't let rage swallow you whole; remember you are the person who is feeling anger. Maybe you and I can be persons who stop to notice how anger rises in our bodies, persons who stop to consider what this feeling is telling us, and what kind of action it might push us toward. And then, maybe, we can become persons who carefully consider the best, most helpful way to care for ourselves and the rest of the world.

We might prefer, we may aspire, to be less angry or to be angry less often or to be angry in a different way. Diminishing anger will likely be good for our health and our sense of well-being. Diminishing anger will promote peace in our families, society, and the world. If we pay even the slightest attention, we notice that the toxicity of anger hormones flooding our blood leaves us overwhelmed and exhausted. Philosopher Buddhaghosa says that holding on to anger is like grasping a hot coal with the intent of throwing it at someone else; you are the one who gets burned. Pagan feminist Starhawk says: Rage, resentment and the lust for revenge don't attract good things to us. What you send out returns on you three times over.

I, Guy, will not judge another's rage; I don't what wounds it rises from. And in itself, rage harms only the rageful person. Personally, my experience is that softening anger, regulating it a bit, almost always helps me make better choices in response to a violation. Over the years, we learn not to hit "send" too quickly on our emails. I can write out my feelings about a sibling in a letter--but drop the letter in a drawer instead of the mail. When we're angry our actions and reactive speech are often disproportionate, unjust or counterproductive. When we are angry, we perceive the world through a certain lens. That lens sharpens, intensifies, puts into all caps certain facets of a situation as seen from one particular angle. This brings into focus things that might be brushed aside or overlooked, so that is good. But it blurs out the background, which means the *context*, and thus may make it harder to appreciate other relevant and important aspects of a situation.

When/if we do choose to diminish anger, *there are ways to work in that direction*. There are techniques for training ourselves to be less angry, less often, and less likely to take actions driven by anger. Muhammad said, "When you get angry while standing, sit down. If that calms you, good; otherwise, lie down. When you are angry, you should stay silent." Along the same lines, Thomas Jefferson said, "When angry, count to ten before you speak; if very angry, count to one hundred."

With such a pause, we can reflect on *the immediate harm we do ourselves* when we let anger make our choices for us. The Buddhist tradition tells us that *the person who suffers real moral injury is the one who wills harm on another*. If we will harm on an aggressor, then we actually have already harmed ourselves in a way that the aggressor never could. When someone verbally abuses you or defames you, the Stoics suggest that we reflect, "It seems that way to him," recognizing that our point of view is not absolute or privileged. It just happens to be ours, at this moment. When anger brings the impulse to harm, we can reflect: does acting that way fit with our own values? How would our moral role models act? What would Martin Luther King do?

Martha Nussbaum has made some of the strongest arguments *against* anger; she advises us to respond to injury, if we can, in a spirit of generosity. This reminds me of the Buddhist suggestion: if nothing

else works, try giving a gift to someone against whom you hold a grudge. Paradoxically, this often works! I know: I have taken brownies to the dean's office.

But I am not convinced that any technique can utterly and permanently purge anger. And *probably* we don't really want that.

The Buddha said: "Let none deceive another, or despise any being in any state. Let none through anger or ill-will wish harm upon another." Indeed, let us not despise one another, let us not harm one another through anger. Given its horrific dangers, we should take care not to *become* rage, not to be controlled by it, but rather to use it skillfully, when it arises, to power the work of justice.

So . . . in sum, my knowledge-for-now is that anger is natural, not shameful, very powerful, and very dangerous. We are always responsible for our actions--and because anger often drives actions intending harm toward our brothers and sisters--we should regulate and redirect our anger, focusing on a ferocious determination to work together for justice.

May it be so!