

On Anger (1983)

With the recent publication of Carol Tarvis' scholarly exploration of **Anger: The Most Misunderstood Emotion** (Simon and Shuster, 1983) anger has once again become a subject of widespread consideration and debate. It's interestingly not coincidental that experts and reviews of the book as well as features on the subject have appeared in many newspapers and magazines during the past few weeks, at a time in history when we have so much to feel angry about.

What do we do with our rage when we feel it? How do we uncover it when we suspect that it lies just below the surface of our disappointment and frustrations? How do we avoid being taken advantage of in situations where the direct expression of anger is prohibited? Are our previous assumptions about anger correct? Does repressing it lead to illness, depression, or suicidal eruptions and violence later on? Can anger be used constructively?

Not only is it interesting that the subject of anger should resurface during these times of massive economic injustice, grand scale marital and familial breakup and rampant crime, but it is also curious that the way anger is being talked and written about now, i.e. as misunderstood and perhaps overrated is quite a different slant than the popular arguments being put forth by its proponents five or ten years ago.

When the Black, Women's, Gay and Disabled People's liberation movements, for example, began uncovering and analyzing the misguided and mistaken assumptions of our life role training, widespread anger was acknowledged at having had unnecessary limits placed upon our possibilities. Demanding our rights to free choices and equal opportunities, we exposed the scam of alleged inferiority with loud protests and righteous indignation.

Each movement's literature gave ample justification to such expressions of anger. It was not only OK but downright self-respectingly upright to vent our newly discovered rage, to let it out—not only because it was there and considered healthy psychologically to deal with (and not repress) it but also because the expression of anger, especially amongst women and Black folk, gave a positive and absolute negation to prevailing theories that it was just not in the nature of those groups to do so. By expressing anger openly and directly, we broke through our assigned roles as healthy subordinates who meekly complied with the status quo.

Over time, however, the free and direct expression of anger, has perhaps gotten out of hand. Despite the much-needed changes some anger elicited; violence has skyrocketed amongst all peoples—both the formerly oppressed and the currently threatened power elite.

Theodore Isaac Rubin, M.D., who 10 years ago published **The Angry Book**, in which he expounded upon the glories of anger's free, open and direct expression, has just this year published **Reconciliations** wherein he now advocates the prevention of anger's emergence in the first place, through the development of a pride free, mellow life attitude. By pride he seems to mean an inordinate focus of self. He does not advocate passivity or allowing oneself to be exploited, but rather suggests that letting go of the pride bases of our anger will free us to struggle more clearly and constructively for what is most important to us and will allow us to compromise when necessary. How often do we win battles and at the same time, lose friends, lovers, good working relations, etc., because we refuse to compromise for reasons of pride or ego. As Dear Abby presciently noted to a writer in the midst of such a bind: Would you rather be right or in the relationship?

All this change in speculation and philosophy about anger is as interesting in what it implies about broad political issues as it is in relation to intrapsychic and interpersonal relations. For example, one can view the whole armaments race as pride/anger related. A million dollars a minute is wasted on this planet at the expense of its inhabitants' basic survival needs because no one superpower will capitulate to the others' dominance in military strength. Obviously, the free and open expression of anger using anyone's stockpiled weaponry would mean widespread disaster and destruction of the earth.

Similarly, we cannot go around as individuals simply venting our personal angers without consequence to someone—a factor that eludes many newly assertive anger sharers.

To express one's gut feelings is fine, gets them off one's chest and clears the internal air. But honest assertion is no guarantee of being appreciated for what one has to say—or of getting results.

The simple, direct and constructive expression of anger may be a necessary step along the way to clear and constructive communication, but it is not an end in itself. That may be what we're learning these days in this new stage of expressing anger.

Once that first acknowledgment and recognition of one's ability to express anger is accomplished and if positive change in others or in situations is really desired, one must look at how to make one's criticisms positively motivating, not threatening or intimidating.

The process of anger, you might say, is a developmental one, and, as such, involves stages. It appears that we have simply grown up a bit over the past few years. We have realized that everyone is capable of having and expressing a full range of emotional expressions—including anger—regardless of race, gender, age or physical configuration of body. We can now move beyond the unconstructive and ineffective methods of simply venting rage into those that can accomplish good and needed change.

As Gandhi so wisely taught us, the best change is effected when its necessity is viewed as desirable by and for all concerned. To win by threatening (i.e. repressing) another is to set in motion a time bomb. That which has been repressed will eventually find expression in some form—be it retaliation or self-destruction. To truly succeed is to realize common benefits among everyone involved in an anger related issue, so that there are no losers. An extraordinarily difficult task at times, but always worth pursuing, is acquiring the skills of constructive criticism, (See Gracie Lyon's Handbook of that name.)

Bertolt Brecht once wrote in his poem called *To Posterity* "Alas, we who tried to lay the foundations of kindness could not ourselves be kind." If anger against injustice is to be true to itself and to its intended ends, its expression must be honorable and humble, caring and constructive, as righteous and principled in its process as in its goal.