

THE POWER OF ANGER

Many people are frightened by feelings, both positive and negative, their own as well as those of others. This fear is unfortunate and unnecessary. If we respect our feelings, we will find a friend in what heretofore we have feared. The more destabilizing a feeling tends to be, the less inclined we are to own and use it. When we repress, ignore, or otherwise fail to acknowledge a feeling, it is not banished, it is simply unbridled and left to rampage often disguised and uncontrolled in our lives. As in all other important things in life, our feelings need the discipline of balance if they are to work for us and not against us.

Anger is one of the most complicated feelings we have. Anger is a hot feeling which if expressed in the wrong manner, time and place may sear the angry person as much as (or more than) the person to whom it is directed. While we are not always in control of the timing of anger, if anger shows up too frequently we need to find out why. It is not unusual for some seemingly insignificant thing to open up a repressed pocket of anger and cause a response of such magnitude that it obviously has to do with something more than the incident at hand. We have all seen anger that obviously was not about what it was about. It was about something else. Perhaps you have experienced an episode of unexpected historical anger. I have.

When I was growing up on a farm we had many tools in our shed. Not all of them were used every day or even every year. Among our tools was a small box of dynamite. It was seldom used and always highly respected. It was an excellent tool for removing stumps or opening up a ditch, but we all knew that when mishandled, it could also blow your hand off. In a way, anger is like dynamite. It should be used infrequently and with care. There is really no excuse for allowing your unbridled anger to blow someone's hand off or to bruise their heart.

What we see and experience in childhood tends to color our coping mechanisms when we become adults. We tend to model our use of anger by the way in which we saw anger used in our family of origin. If when we were young, we were surrounded by people who used unbridled anger to dominate and subdue others, we are likely to consider such abusive anger a handy tool when we are adults. However, we need not be stuck forever with the negative influences with which we grew up. With intentional effort and perhaps a little outside help, we can remodel our attitudes and our view of reality.

Adlai Stevenson once observed, "You can tell the size of a person by the size of the thing that makes him angry". On July 8, 2007 the New York Times carried an account of a base ball game between the Mobile Bay Bears and the Montgomery Biscuits which illustrates the danger of exaggerated and inappropriate anger.

The Mobile Bay Bears relief pitcher, Matt Elliott, gave up at tying run on a sacrifice fly in the bottom of the 8th inning. Elliott was so angry about giving up the tying run that when he went to the bathroom behind the dugout at Riverwalk Stadium he slammed the door and broke the locking mechanism which was set inside a steel frame in the side of a concrete wall. When the game resumed for the 9th inning Matt Elliott could not be found. There was an 8 minute game delay as they searched for Elliott. Then they had to take additional time to allow a new relief pitcher to warm up. All the while Elliott was beating on the bathroom door trying to get out. The game went on and Montgomery scored in the 9th inning, winning the game. Elliott stayed locked in the bathroom for 47 minutes, 20 of them after the game as stadium workers and finally the Montgomery Fire Department worked to open the locked door.

Be careful about slamming doors when you are angry. You may get caught on the wrong side of the door.

Everyone becomes angry. That is easy because, like the Witch of Endor, anger stands on the margins of each of our lives waiting and eager to be summoned. Aristotle said, "To be angry with the right person, to the right degree, at the right time, for the right purpose, and in the right way, is not within the power of everybody, and it is not easy." When one is in control of the timing, extent and direction of his or her anger, this powerful feeling can be a useful tool. When you fail to monitor your anger and allow it to erupt unbridled it can ruin relationships and make one look like a fool.

Think about that the next time you feel your hackles rising.

