

ANGER

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Back in the seventies my brother used to do a brilliant impression of an angry hippie. His body froze. Straight arms were suspended slightly away from his sides, fingers spread open. With his head tilted quizzically, he was the picture of arrested befuddlement. The collision of impulses in his face was riveting—the edges of his mouth were turned up, struggling to hold onto the perpetual smile (must maintain the smile, the sweet, open countenance that welcomes all things with love and wonder); but his eyes were wide and round and his irises darted crazily, looking for escape and not knowing which way to go. What to do? Torn between loyalty to his chosen tribe and the reality of this crashing emotion, he was caught—vibrating and paralyzed.

Years later I got into a disagreement with some of my T'ai Chi students during a class. Anger, I said, is a good emotion. It can be an appropriate response to injustice or cruelty. And it gives us the energy and fuel we need to do something about the situation. Anger, they said angrily, is bad—it can never be a positive emotion.

It's neither good nor bad. It can be either good or bad. It's energy—to be used and expressed. First I have to recognize and acknowledge it and then I have to decide what to do with it. It's the same with all the emotions. Unexpressed feeling is damaging to the "walls of its prison" as Charlotte Bronte put it. But judgment has to be used when it comes to where, when, and how to release emotion. Sometimes that judgment needs to be made in an instant (and sometimes the circumstances are so overwhelming that judgment doesn't enter into it). Immediate expression of genuine, warranted anger can do wonders toward unraveling an unnecessarily complex, layered situation or toward preventing the tangle in the first place. It takes acuity, self-awareness, and compassion—for myself as well as others—to know the best, most effective way to show anger.

I discovered I could consciously use anger to solidify myself for T'ai Chi demonstrations. I had stage fright and although I'd been practicing for twenty-seven years and teaching for seventeen, "performing" T'ai Chi with many outside eyes focused on my movement was still nerve-wracking. I was scheduled to demonstrate a form in front of about forty new students one evening. A teacher who was supposed to end her class fifteen minutes before mine began was running over into my class time. People were piling up inside the doorway and along the sides of the room. She acted oblivious. It wasn't the first time and I had already talked with her about it—more than once. She was notorious for doing this to other teachers as well. I was mad. When she finally ended her class, I knew I'd have to put off expressing my objections to her—I needed to proceed. I did the best, most confident demonstration that I had ever done. I was rooted

to the ground, absolutely solid. I executed smooth, sure leg lifts (slow-motion kicks) and my hands were rock steady. I was conscious of the effect of my anger. When it started to die down, I told myself the story of the woman's inconsideration and disrespectfulness. I stoked it, built it back up, and made it last through the entire performance. After that, I evoked anger to get me through other demonstrations.

My Chinese brush painting instructor said that different brush strokes should be executed while experiencing different emotions. Anger gives the bamboo leaf its direction and conciseness and edge. So as I held the brush above the paper, I summoned anger by revisiting an infuriating episode from my life.

Psychologists at the University of California, Santa Barbara conducted a study in which they deliberately angered student volunteers and then asked them to choose the better of two opposing arguments—one backed by solid research, the other by relatively weak information. Compared to a placid control group, the angry people cut to the essential facts and made better judgments. The researchers concluded that a dose of galvanizing anger (as opposed to hysterical rage) can sharpen focus.

Like all emotions, anger can be taken to extremes. Working within political organizations with a definite leaning has put me into contact with people who are angry all the time. There is limitless cause for anger and it does serve as a catalyst. But some people live in a continuous simmer that's looking for any excuse to boil over.

One evening I was listening to a talk given by a man who had spent some months in Iraq during the first year of the war. He mentioned a suicide bombing that killed dozens of Iraqis waiting in line outside a building. Soon after the incident, he and an Iraqi taxi driver were speculating on who might have perpetrated the attack. The driver said Muslims would not kill other Muslims and the speaker accepted this. They came to the conclusion that the CIA was behind it. No one in the audience questioned this. The CIA has proven itself capable of all sorts of atrocities, but in this case it was not in the interest of the U.S. administration to foment violence in Iraq. It was just the opposite. They wanted Iraq to be a happy, peaceful country now that the U.S. was occupying it. Murder and mayhem only served to make people question the administration's policy and judgment. Also, both the speaker and the driver were conveniently overlooking all sorts of historical and contemporary examples of Muslims killing other Muslims. Blaming the CIA was easier—it was a chance to vent (and augment) existing anger.

The speaker's conclusion about the CIA defied common sense. Stored anger makes objectivity impossible, clouds critical thinking, and distorts or obliterates new information. I'm guessing most of the audience (composed of sympathetic progressives) swallowed what he said without thinking. This blind-sidedness provides easy openings for political opponents to dismiss the entirety of a group's arguments.

Anger is routinely misdirected—unleashed on a surrogate. I've done it myself, watched someone else do it, and been the innocent target. If a person feels she can't

show her anger to the source of the emotion because it's an inanimate thing, a set of accidental circumstances, or someone who might retaliate in all sorts of disagreeable ways, she takes it out on the bank teller or the friend or the child.

The misuses of anger have earned it, in this New Age, the classification as a "negative" emotion. There are no inherently negative emotions. It all depends on how they're used and whether they go on too long or are taken too far.

Look at grief. A friend I'll call Susan lost her husband of thirty-nine years. She's grieving. One of her friends, someone who has followed a particular Indian guru for decades and considers herself on the road to enlightenment, called Susan three months after the man's death. The caller asked how my friend was doing. She said she was grieving. The caller said, "Still?" implying Susan wasn't practicing the proper detachment and acceptance. Susan takes comfort from a story I told her about a man who essentially stayed in bed for four years after losing his long-time wife, the sight in one eye, and his job (through retirement) all within a year. At the end of the four years, he phoned a friend and said, "I'm back!" Those four years were not wasted. They were necessary. Grief is a healing process that can only be truncated or interrupted with destructive results. The griever is the sole person to know when it's over—one year? two? four? And profound grief is something that never entirely ends—it becomes part of us, ideally making us bigger, broader, and more compassionate.

We're not supposed to harbor "negative" emotions like anger, anxiety, fear, and insecurity. There's such an emphasis now on thinking positively, and I know that it works—counting my blessings, seeing the glass as half full—but it can also be misdirected or taken to extremes. It doesn't always fit the occasion. I have allowed positive thinking to lead me into a few very dark tunnels. Trying to maintain a positive attitude no matter what can keep me from acknowledging that the circumstances are all wrong and should not be accommodated or adjusted to. Maybe I have good reason to feel angry, anxious, afraid, or insecure. Sometimes the most positive, accurate response I can have to a venture or a person is don't do it, or stay away from them. I've suppressed anger, believing it's a manifestation of my "shadow side." I've shoved it aside in a misguided attempt to think positively. But if it's the proper reaction and fuels a justified counteraction, then it's my "light side." The real meaning of my "light side" is that it sheds light; it illuminates something so I can see it clearly. Anger can be a part of that because it can make me insightful and incisive.

It's the mark of a mature person to be able to distinguish between righteous anger that calls for constructive action in the world (possibly a change in career or relationship) and anger that comes from a wounded ego, pettiness, jealousy, unwarranted fear or insecurity—in which case it's *inner* growth and change that's called for. Either way, people are afraid of anger and often lack the courage to face it because change demands new thinking, initiative, and resourcefulness. The demands of anger can be very inconvenient. Well-used anger can thrust us into the unknown.

People who claim never to be angry aren't to be trusted. Their breezy, perpetual, inappropriate smile—maintained even while telling of some injustice or calamity that has

befallen them—is a warning to be heeded. Like my brother's angry hippie, they're disconnected from themselves. In time, stored spleen will spew out randomly and unexpectedly, with the overblown force of accumulated lava. What's most confusing is that it will be filtered through that smile.

Anger wells up in me from time to time. It must be expressed and will be expressed—eventually, with or without my blessing. It's not something to overcome—trying to eradicate it or pretending it doesn't exist is futile and destructive. I do have to recognize it, acknowledge it, and use it.