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06/2017 | Monthly Topic

Flashing red: the anger signal

by Harriet Lerner

We women have long been taught to avoid anger, not only the expression of it, but the experience of it. We swallow our anger (“it’s not worth fighting over”), or we deny it entirely because we are supposed to be the nurturers, the soothers, the peacemakers, the steadyers of rocked boats. We can keep peace and hold relationships in place as though our lives depended on it.

Or, if we do allow ourselves to experience and express our anger, we soon learn that it's not easy to manage our anger effectively, with dignity, clarity, and strength. We may experience and express our anger too intensely, too quickly, and that gets us nowhere.

Though feeling anger signals that there is a problem at hand, venting anger does not help solve it. Venting may even prevent change by reinforcing old rules and patterns in a relationship. When emotional intensity is high, many of us seek to change the other person (“it’s your fault!”), and we fail to exercise our power to clarify and change our own selves.

Those of us who are locked into ineffective fighting, complaining, and blaming suffer as deeply as those of us who dare not feel or express anger at all. These two styles of managing anger may look as different as night and day, but they are two sides of the same coin. In the end, we both end up feeling helpless and powerless. And nothing changes.

Here are 12 do's and don'ts from my book, *The Dance of Anger*. Our goal is to learn to use the energy of our anger as a tool for change, in the service of strengthening both ourselves and our important relationships. We can all learn to identify the true sources of anger and to use our anger as a powerful vehicle for creating lasting change.

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Anger Do's and Don'ts

1. Do speak up when an issue is important to you. Obviously, we need not personally address every irritation or injustice that comes along. Simply letting something go can be an act of maturity. But it is a mistake to stay silent if the cost is to feel bitter or resentful. We devalue ourselves when we fail to take a stand on things that matter to us.

2. Don't strike when the iron is hot. If your goal is to change an entrenched pattern, the worst time to talk about it may be when you are feeling angry or intense. If your temperature starts rising in the middle of a conversation, you can always say, "I need a little time to sort out my thoughts. Let's set up another time to talk about this some more." Seeking temporary distance is not the same as a cold withdrawal or an emotional cutoff.

3. Do take time out to think about the problem and to clarify your position. Before you speak out, ask yourself these questions: "What is it about this situation that makes me angry?" "What is the real issue here?" "Where do I stand?" "What do I want to accomplish?" "Who is responsible for what?" "What, specifically, do I want to change?" "What are the things I will and will not do?"

4. Don't use below-the-belt tactics. These include: blaming, interpreting, diagnosing, labeling, analyzing, preaching, moralizing, ordering, warning, interrogating, ridiculing, and lecturing.

5. Do speak in "I" language. Say, "I think," "I feel," "I fear," "I want." A true "I" statement says something about the self without criticizing or blaming the other person, and without holding the other person responsible for your feelings or reactions. Watch out for disguised "you" statements or pseudo-"I" statements. (For example, "I think you are controlling and self-centered.")

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6. Don't make vague requests. ("I want you to be more sensitive to my needs.") Let the other person know specifically what you want. ("The best way you can help me now is simply to listen. I really don't want advice right now.") Don't expect people to anticipate your needs or do things that you haven't asked for. Even people who love you can't read your mind.

7. Do appreciate the fact that people are different. We move away from stuck relationships when we recognize that there are as many ways of seeing the world as there are people in it. If you're fighting about who has the "truth," you may be missing the point. Different perspectives and ways of reacting do not necessarily mean that one person is right and the other wrong.

8. Don't tell another person what they think or feel, or what they should think or feel. If another person is angry in response to a change you've made, don't criticize their feelings or tell them they have no right to be angry. Better to say, "I understand that you're angry, and if I were in your shoes, I might be angry, too. But I've thought it over and this is my decision." One person's right to be angry does not mean that the other person is to blame.

9. Do recognize that each person is responsible for their own actions. For example, if you are angry about the distance between you and your dad since he remarried, it is your responsibility to find a new way to approach the situation. Don't blame your dad's new wife because she "won't let him" be close to you. Your dad's behavior is his responsibility, not his wife's.

10. Don't spin your wheels trying to convince others of the rightness of your position. If the other person is not hearing you, simply say, "Well, it may sound crazy to you, but this is how I feel," or, "I understand that you disagree, but I guess we see the problem differently."

11. Do avoid speaking through a third party. For example, if you are angry with your brother, don't say, "I think my daughter felt terrible when you didn't come to her school play." Instead, try, "I was upset when you didn't come. You're important to me and I really wanted you to be there."

12. Don't expect change to come about from hit-and-run confrontations. Change occurs slowly in close relationships. If you make even a small change, you will be tested many times to see if you really mean it.

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And one more. Don't get discouraged if you fall on your face several times as you try to change the way you manage your anger. You may find that you start out fine but then blow it when things heat up. That's part of the process, so be patient with yourself. You will have many opportunities to get back on track and try again.

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06/03/2017 | Faith Reflections, Monthly Topic

Faith reflections: You've got me feeling emojis

by Kristen Glass Perez

When I was a kid, there was an image that always struck terror in my heart. It was a sickly green frowning face with its tongue sticking out, and it clearly meant “stay away!”

Who was this green-faced demon? Well, he was named Mr. Yuk and he was powerful. I knew that he was not to be messed with.

Mr. Yuk is a trademarked graphic created by the Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh and used to label household chemicals that are poisonous. Mr. Yuk's green face very clearly expresses disgust, sickness and anger. He appeared on things that lived under our kitchen sink, like bleach and oven cleaner. To this day, his image gives me the creeps.

The vintage emoji

I consider Mr. Yuk to be the precursor to the modern emoji. Do you speak emoji? According to the dictionary, an emoji is a digital image or icon used to express an idea or emotion. In my digital lifetime, I have seen the emoji evolve in rapid succession. Now, I can use an emoji to reflect my choice of wine or shoes. We've come a long way from Mr. Yuk!

The premise is the same, though. There is something basic about core emotions like anger, joy and sadness that seems to be easily expressed in graphic shorthand—frowny faces, smiley faces, weepy faces. But while it's easy to drop a symbol of an emotion into an email, navigating emotions IRL (in real life) can be a more challenging.

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Slow to anger

Anger is a natural part of human life, like the other emotions. In scripture, we see many examples of anger.

Psalm 145:8 sings, "The Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love."

Notice, the text it does not say that God is never angry. The psalmist reminds us that we have a loving, gracious and merciful God, who also can be angry. A natural part of the true depth of life is anger.

The housewives of Biblical times

Long before the *Real Housewives* of here and there began flipping tables on television, Jesus famously overturned the tables in the temple—in anger.

"In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. He told those who were selling the doves, 'Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!'" (*John 2:14-16*).

There is a flip side (see what I did there?) to every emotion. Jesus' anger is triggered by injustice. In flipping the tables, he calls into question practices that were embedded into the culture of the temple. That culture could not be sustained without the exchange of currency and the selling of animals for sacrifice. In this way, Jesus' anger challenges us to examine our own choices.

Are we and our faith communities using our financial resources to continually reveal God's presence to our neighbors, or are we doing things simply to sustain our own comfortable practices? We don't get to the answer without going through anger: anger about what challenges us, anger about what we do or do not want to talk about, anger about something that triggers us unexpectedly.

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I like to think that those are some of the things that were simmering in Jesus that day at the temple.

Growling as emoji

My dog gives a warning sign when he's angry or upset. He growls and the hair on his neck stands up. This is his signal that something isn't right, and it's time to pay attention.

I used to scold my dog for growling, but I have learned that scolding just tells my dog that instead of growling a warning, he should act. My dog's growl seems to be his own built-in emoji or Mr. Yuk sticker. It's how he lets me know that there's something out there I need to pay attention to.

We might think about our own anger similarly. There is no full human experience without anger. We can experience anger with our friends, our family, our children, our co-workers, and even with our faith communities. We might make a point of noticing when we want to utter the human equivalent of a growl, and pay attention to what's making us feel that way before we act.

What causes us to react with anger? Is it injustice? Is it danger? Paying attention to our own emojis will help us live more fully into who God has created us to be. At the same time, we need to pay attention to the emojis that others flash at us. They can be a clue that something big is about to happen.

Like all human beings created in God's image, we are faced with anger. It comes alongside joy and sadness. Anger is not to be ignored, but instead can be seen as an invitation to be united in and ignited with a passion for justice. Anger is a part of the fullness of humanity. What we do with it is a response to God's grace.

Closing prayer:

Dear God, thank you for the gift of emotion. Help us to remember that as human beings we have agency in your creation. Help us to use our full range of emotions to respond in love and action to serve and love our neighbors as ourselves. Amen.

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Discussion questions:

1. What are some of the triggers you notice about your own anger?
2. When has your anger helped you to be a force for the greater good?
3. When has your own anger made you uncomfortable?
4. What emoji would you like to invent?

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