

## **The hold Anger has over us**

As we begin Lent, with its emphasis on soul-searching and repentance, we might reflect on anger and its place in our living — its nature, its causes, and how it can be creative or destructive.

With two young children and a wonderful new home in a fashionable part of north London, Rebecca had everything that she ever dreamed of. Her diagnosis of cancer shook her to the core and affected her marriage, her faith, and her deepest securities. The anger she felt when the oncologist told her in a matter-of-fact way never left her. It was raw, unpredictable, and created all kinds of hostilities.

One day, she woke up and decided to do something: to gather young mothers together to listen to each other and hear what living with cancer had done to and for them. This support network, now ten years old, has been transformative for those who are ready to face their fears with others. Here is a creative example of how to use anger.

Michael finds himself feeling aggressive. He has worked hard in his accountancy firm for ten years. He has always been willing to stay behind to meet deadlines and felt himself to be a supportive presence to his colleagues. Under the direction of a new senior partner, he feels disregarded and devalued. He cannot find a way out of this negativity. He feels discriminated against. He finds himself, out of the blue, attacking others. Here Michael lives with the destructive effects of anger.

All have angry feelings from time to time. It is an emotion that can be harnessed if it is understood. Anger is an emotion directed towards one who inflicts real or supposed wrong on us, such as the driver who cuts us up on the motorway.

Anger is thus a natural feeling, experienced when we feel frustrated or hurt. The pressure on time caused by constant family demands leaves us feeling that no one cares about us. Anger can be our response to perceived threat or unfairness. War gives rise to anger about the use of power in our global economy.

Anger can be caused by many things, sometimes at the same time. For example, feeling angry with friends or family when they do not listen or understand; or feeling angry at how little we are supported at work. The work itself may be the source of insecurity and conflict; or it might be something more general, feeling angry at the Government and financial institutions.

And that is just the present. Unsettling memories from the past can also lead to angry thoughts and feelings. We wonder what life might have been like had we made different choices. We have to live with the imperfections in all relationships. Recognising that we are angry, and articulating why, is an important part of the searching of the soul.

When we have connected with the causes of anger, we might consider how to transform its destructive potential. It is important to understand that it's not people or events that make us angry, but our reaction to them.

Anger turned inwards may also result in a lack of assertiveness, stress, low mood, or even self-harm. We can get locked into a denial of how we feel.

Repressing or ignoring anger may give the sense of dealing with it, but this inward control fails to harness creativity. Unless anger is managed properly, it can have a devastating effect on our family, work, and overall well-being.

Anger is generally interpreted as a dangerous emotion in Western culture. We are told not to get angry. Most of us have learned to evade or ignore it. We fear harming others if we get angry with them. Anger is one of the seven deadly sins. When we do express anger, we often justify ourselves. "My partner is stubborn and doesn't care if I am upset; so I teach him a lesson by showing how angry I am."

The Bible recognises the redemptive aspects of anger. Jesus expressed anger in a number of circumstances, demonstrating concern for particular individuals. In the Temple, Jesus threw out usurers and others who were taking advantage of the poor (Luke 19.45-46). Jesus was also angry with the Pharisees, who wanted to catch him breaking one of their laws (Mark 3.1-6), yet were unwilling to consider the real morality of the law.

In both cases, Jesus was angry with people who were doing wrong and who refused to listen to God. He feels for others, rebukes those with power, and uses anger as an expression of care when confronting individuals with truth, so that they might repent. The Bible asks us to make anger redemptive. We are right to feel anger and express it. When it enables change, anger becomes transformative.

It is important to understand how we express our anger. If anger is ignored, it can lead to significant problems, such as mistrust and alienation. We can spend our lives avoiding our feelings. We digress or escape. We can over-work, or over- eat or drink.

If we ignore these feelings, they can make us explode when it all becomes too much. Anger can lead to intimidating, violent, or bullying behaviour, making those around us anxious and frightened. "I show people I work with who is the boss by giving them a good shouting-at."

WE NEED to consider how this powerful emotion can be put to creative use.

First, we can try to understand what it is that triggers our anger. Working out what makes us angry now can be a step towards acknowledging strong feelings, and lead to the possibility of changing our attitude towards these feelings. We can talk about them, and try to accept that nothing can change what has happened in the past. A journal can be useful to give shape to these reflections.

Hanging on to angry feelings from years gone by can cause unnecessary problems, but, if we can identify them, we may be able to change the way we deal with current situations.

Second, if anger is building up, we need to deal with it. We shouldn't let it simmer away until we have a violent outburst. If possible, we could try taking ourselves away from the situation, thinking about the bigger picture, and considering the consequences of our behaviour before we react.

Third, we might ask ourselves how far some of this is associated with our lifestyle. Do we pack too much in so that we are struggling to cope? We might need to do fewer of the demanding tasks, and spend more time doing things that we find relaxing. Find a pleasurable way to let off steam, which will prevent the build-up of tension and increase self-confidence. Even simple pleasures such as a relaxing bath, a pleasant walk, or a good book can help.

Fourth, make sure to eat a healthy diet and get enough sleep. Lack of sleep and food can make us feel irritable. It may help to talk things over regularly with a friend or member of the family.

Fifth, learning to keep calm may help us cope with our feelings. Learning to breathe slowly, prayer, silence, meditation, and other relaxation techniques can help us to slow down, and to see and feel more. Sometimes we have to learn to let go of our desire for control, and to allow God to take and shape us. A regular life of prayer can place our lives into the broader shape of God's narrative of love.

Sixth, confrontations are usually hard to deal with. It is important that we try to express ourselves assertively without losing our cool. We can do this by preparing what we want to say. If the discussion gets heated, it can be useful to remember that it is OK for someone else to have a different opinion.

We can try to express ourselves as clearly as possible, and use phrases such as "I feel angry with you because . . ." rather than being abusive. We can also try to be clear about what we expect to come out of the discussion. We can listen to the other person, and avoid taking things too personally.

Anger is complex. This fearful emotion can be embraced and transformed. It is essential that we explore with ourselves and others what we do with our anger. Reflecting on what makes us angry, being aware of the different ways anger shows itself, and finding ways of putting our emotions to creative and spiritual use might be part of our journey of self-discovery this Lent.