

# Anger in the House of Formation

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**W**e experience anger in ourselves and in our candidates and novices at every level of formation, and many times it leaves us feeling frightened, numb, fuming, or just plain bewildered. In this article I would like to trace some of the dynamics of anger and to reflect upon what I have learned from my relationships with our candidates.

A few weeks ago I was throwing some trash away and noticed that someone—obviously, one of the candidates—had thrown away some aluminum cans. I was furious. How could he do such a thing? They all know that we recycle each and every aluminum can, as well as most of our plastic, newspaper, and glass. We even water our plants with our gray water—we are environmentally aware! Yet one of the candidates had deliberately thrown away several aluminum cans. Was he trying to get back at me for something? Was this a case of deliberate passive aggression? Or was it just plain carelessness? Had everything we agreed to in our house plan gone down the drain? The more I thought about it, the angrier I became.

Ironically, the smallest things that happen to us sometimes get us the most angry. But the dynamics of anger over small issues and sizable ones are very similar. The best definition of anger that I have discovered is found in Robert Solomon's book *The Passions*. Solomon defines anger as a prereflective judgment of personal offense. And that judgment of offense very often involves feelings of self-worth

and self-identity. This definition reflects the very close connection between the emotional and rational parts of who we are. Many people visualize emotion and intellect as being on opposite ends of a continuum. I propose that they mesh together, like the interlaced fingers of our two hands: both hands are distinct, yet they are interrelated.

When I looked down into the trash can and saw those aluminum cans, I was personally offended. As I reflected about it later—because sometimes it takes a while to calm down from the feeling of anger—I realized that when I saw those cans, I instantly judged that one of the candidates had discarded them and that he had done it on purpose. But there was more. What also flashed into my mind was how this might look to the provincial or to other professed members of the community if they were to see it. What would they think of me? Would they think I was doing a poor job as director of our house of formation? My identity as director was being called into question, was being attacked. My anger was part of my defense response to help protect me from the attack. That experience of anger was about much more than someone throwing an aluminum can away. And the fuller meaning of anger becomes available to us only when we reflect about the experience and decide to learn something about ourselves and others. That, in short, is what I have learned to do with my candidates. I don't do it each and every time I experience

anger, but when I judge that it is necessary—especially when I notice that I am becoming resentful—we sit down together and examine our emotions. We try to dig a little deeper than the immediate issue or problem; we attempt to disclose some of the deeper movements within us.

The judgment that gives rise to anger is really several judgments that one makes simultaneously and spontaneously. In my case I judged that a candidate was the perpetrator; that the action was deliberate, and possibly an act of revenge for something I had done; that the situation would affect how others evaluated my worth as a director; that I was not doing my job well enough; that the action could have been avoided by the candidate, who should have known better. I probably made additional judgments of which I am still not aware. As is quite evident, anger is generated by how we interpret events in our lives. If we interpret that those events were done to attack us (or another) personally, and if they could have been avoided, and if somehow our self-esteem or identity has been diminished, we will be angry. We are intricate, complex people; just trying to unravel one seemingly insignificant incident can verify that. I think that part of the formation process is to model and encourage the freedom to express some of the mystery of our own complexity, especially when it is messy and awkward.

### ANGER IS NECESSARY

We need our anger. Anger protects and restores our status as persons. It lets us know that we have been offended, and when we express our anger, it lets others know that they are doing something objectionable—that they have hurt us and that we aren't going to let them walk all over us. We have boundaries and limits, and our anger gives us the personal power to stop the offense. Anger regulates our social relationships by letting others know that they have gone too far and that we may retaliate if they don't change their ways (when a lion roars, people move back). Even national groups like M.A.D.D. (Mothers Against Drunk Drivers) use acronyms that describe the emotion of anger and what it can do if it is used constructively.

Sometimes our judgments are incorrect. Once, when I was teaching in the seminary, I had to interview several students concerning their yearly evaluation. I put a list on my door, asked them to sign up, and went off to class. Two hours later I decided to check the list. It was gone. I was furious. How dare they do this to me, I fumed. An hour or so later, while cleaning my room, I found the list—I had absentmindedly taken it down myself when I had returned from class. All I could do was laugh at how absurd the whole situation had been. I had used so much emotional energy imagining who had taken the list and why. The judgment of offense was

gone. I was no longer angry, even though the feeling of anger did continue for a good twenty minutes or so, since it took some time for my adrenaline to stop flowing.

At times further information moves us to change our judgments. Sometimes we intentionally choose to change our judgments of offense: maybe the offender had a bad day; maybe he or she just forgot or was preoccupied. At other times, however, we realize that our judgments were correct, and we accept our anger as justified and righteous.

This understanding of anger differs dramatically from the popularized Freudian hydraulic model of anger. According to that model, our conflicting unconscious drives give rise to an energy buildup within us—a reservoir of anger, so to speak. When the reservoir is full, it needs to be discharged by ventilation. This has given rise to a popular “let it all out” (catharsis) strategy for seeking relief from anger. The irony is that often we feel worse after venting angry feelings at someone. Sometimes the ventilation strategy is the only one that works. My experience in formation, however, indicates that exploding in anger rarely works and often makes things worse. There are other, more holistic strategies that can help us cope with our anger.

### CONSTRUCTIVE ANGER STRATEGIES

When I have exploded at one of my candidates I usually take some time—often a day or two—to calm down and to reflect about the incident. Then the candidate and I get together and discuss the incident. Anger is not uncontrollable, and we are not slaves to our unconscious. Anger is not this thing inside of us, apart from us, that dictates how we respond. We can and must take responsibility for the way we feel, for the emotion that we experience inside, and decide what we want to do about it. That is why I talk about anger strategies. I recommend the following method for reconciling anger:

1. *Become aware of your angry feelings.* Don't try to pretend that the feelings are not there; try not to mask or deny the feelings. Listening to the language of our bodies (changes in pulse, muscle tension, breathing) often helps us realize what we are feeling. It sounds easy, but many find it difficult to do. Many of us were taught—either directly or indirectly—that some of our emotions were wrong or inappropriate. Many of us have learned to mask our emotions; for instance, sometimes anger masks other emotions, such as lust or fear, that we do not allow ourselves to recognize. Sometimes there is confusion between what we ought to feel and what we do feel.

2. *Interpret and evaluate the underlying source of the anger.* The focus here is on the person who is angry, not the person who is the object of the anger. You might ask the following questions: What was

the anger all about? What was the judgment you made that brought about the anger? What part of yourself felt/feels attacked or in danger? How have you been personally offended? How has your self-esteem or self-identity been threatened? The important thing is not to blame someone else for the way you feel.

3. *Accept responsibility for your anger and take appropriate action.* That is, choose a strategy that will produce a healthy result. For instance, in one situation it may be appropriate to "tell off" the offender, while in another it may be best to keep silent, or to sit for a while and cool off and then calmly share your feelings with the person, or to talk the situation over with a trusted friend, or to just watch a funny movie. Sometimes it is an attitude that needs to be changed; at other times it is a behavior. Learn from your experiences: Which anger responses/strategies have worked for you in the past, and which haven't?

4. *If you want to and it is possible, seek forgiveness.* Forgiveness is often needed for the sake of the relationship. Even if the other person doesn't deserve our forgiveness, we need it for ourselves. If we hold on to our anger, it can turn into resentment, and that is often self-destructive. The challenge is to reach beyond anger and pain (not to deny them) to claim your legitimate power and dignity as a person, while also acknowledging your weakness and limits. Being in a good relationship demands a gentleness and openness to forgive and to be forgiven—to let go of stubborn pride and to welcome, or to be welcomed back into, relationship. Bring the anger to prayer. Often prayer has a wonderful way of helping us see the truth of the situation, of calming us down and centering us so that we can see a wider reality.

### "I-MESSAGES" HELPFUL

In formation we fall into many of the communication traps that everyone else falls into. It doesn't help, for instance, to focus on who is to blame (if the milk is already spilled, you can't unspill it). The hurt has already been done. Now the focus needs to be on understanding, forgiveness, and reconciliation. It helps to use "I-messages," which avoid verbal aggression. In other words, report your anger (I am mad at you; I feel attacked). Share yourself, not the topic. It doesn't help to use absolutes (never, always, every time). Neither is it helpful to blame third parties (the provincial, or another novice or candidate or professed religious). I think that all of us can learn how to deal with our anger in growth-producing ways. If you make a

mistake, learn from it and move on with your life. And don't be afraid to learn strategies that others have found to be helpful and healthful.

In dealing with my own anger and the anger of my candidates, I try to keep in mind that many of us come from dysfunctional families. As a result of our upbringing, many of us avoid our emotions or believe that our emotions are wrong or bad. At an early age many of us learned to hide our emotions because they just made things worse—and anger was one of the most disruptive. When someone got angry, someone got hit or hurt. We came to believe that emotions were the immediate cause of behavior and therefore had to be ignored or buried inside us because they were so dangerous. Like many of us, our novices and candidates react to anger in different ways. Some avoid or deny the emotion; they employ behavior patterns that were learned in childhood but that no longer work for them as adults. Directors need to model more functional responses. One way of doing that is to share honestly our own struggles and mistakes, the difficulties we have with identity and self-esteem; to be the first to seek reconciliation, to apologize, to ask forgiveness, or to confront a situation. Sometimes I am able to catch myself in midsentence during an angry response and to begin asking myself what the offense was all about, often to the utter amazement of my candidates. They know that I am struggling, like them, to be the best person that I can be. At times that will look rather pleasing, and at other times it will look really messy. It is all right to make a mistake when dealing with anger. Learn from it and move on with your life.

### RECOMMENDED READING

- Bramson, R. *Coping with Difficult People*. New York, New York: Doubleday, 1981.
- Osiek, C. *Beyond Anger: On Being a Feminist in the Church*. Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1986.
- Solomon, R. *The Passions*. Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1976.
- Tavris, C. *Anger: The Misunderstood Emotion*. New York, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1982.



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