

Healthy and Effective Communication of Anger

“You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire.” Matthew 5:21-22 (NRSV)

The epidemic of hateful speech in political and social discourse these days reminds me of what I have learned about anger. According to the Nonviolent Communication teachings of Marshall Rosenberg, anger is like a red light on the dashboard of my car, signaling that something needs attention. However, because I grew up thinking that nice people don’t get angry, I used to look for someone to blame whenever I felt anger rising up inside me. I am so sorry now for the damage I did to others and to my relationships out of my ignorance and lack of understanding. Blaming others drives them away and seldom results in my getting what I want. I realize now that no one else can MAKE me angry. **My feelings are legitimate signals that an important need is not being met, that something I value is not happening, and that I need to take positive action to bring about change. When I call someone else names or make judgments about his or her character and motivations, I am not likely to bring about the change I want.**

Gary Chapman defines anger as “the emotion that arises whenever we encounter what we perceive to be wrong.” [*Anger: Handling a Powerful Emotion in a Healthy Way*, (Chicago: Northfield Publishing, 2007) p. 20] He notes that anger takes place in the body, as well as in the mind, because of the way our autonomic nervous system reacts, and that while we cannot control our bodily reactions, we can – and must -- control how we respond and express our anger. He also declares that **we should be grateful for anger, because it is “designed by God to motivate us to take constructive action in the face of wrongdoing or when facing injustice.” Unfortunately, however, in the heat of anger, we sometimes forget about setting things right and get caught up in trying to punish or exclude those we perceive to be doing something wrong.**

When that red light comes on, when I feel anger rising up inside me, I need to slow myself down and think. What is it that triggered that emotion? What exactly did I see or hear? What thoughts do I have about that event? Are those thoughts true, or might there be other ways of thinking about what happened? What needs are crying out for attention? How can I express those needs in such a way that they are more likely to be met? **Labeling and blaming other persons not only hurts my relationship with them, triggering reactivity that makes them less likely hear what I have to say, but may also keep me from being in touch with what I really want.**

Thomas Gordon, author of *Parent Effectiveness Training: The Proven Program for Raising Responsible Children* (Harmony, 2000) and *Teacher Effectiveness Training: The Program Proven to Help Teachers Bring Out the Best in Students of All Ages* (Crown Archetype, 2010) taught us to own and express our feelings by giving “I Messages,” which involve a simple sentence pattern: “I feel [name of feeling] when I [hear or see] because I want_____.” I have learned to bite my tongue when tempted to say “you” or to speak scathingly of another. If, for example, I overhear racist comments, I try to say “I feel upset when I hear people insulted because of their skin color or ethnicity because I believe everyone deserves respect.” Attacking the speaker and

making judgments about his or her character or mental health might give me momentary satisfaction, but would likely just add fuel to the fire. Better to stick with observable facts and own my reactions to them.

Drs. Tom and Beverly Rodgers, authors of *Soul-Healing Love* (2006) and founders of the Institute for Soul Healing Love in Charlotte, North Carolina, teach that anger is a secondary emotion, offering the acronym GIFT to suggest possible underlying causes: Guilt, feelings of Inferiority, Fear, and Trauma. Another clue for analyzing our anger is to ask ourselves, “When have I felt like this before?” A primitive part of the human brain, called the amygdala, which regulates our perceptions of and reactions to fear and aggression, cannot distinguish between past and present. Consequently, strong feelings will often arise out of proportion to a current event because of unresolved feelings from the past. As a child of divorce, for example, I know that I am susceptible to fear of abandonment. Or perhaps someone else’s boasting may trigger feelings that I am not good enough. **These feelings, whether conscious or not, may lead me to speak and act out of anger, to attack and blame another person, and in some cases to drive away the very persons I hold most dear.**

The principles for healthy expression of anger (own it, name it, ask for what you need) apply in personal relationships as well as politics. Accusations of “you always” or “you never” or labeling someone as thoughtless or diagnosing someone’s character or mental health will likely trigger reactivity and argument. **When I own my feelings and express them without blaming or attacking, no one can argue with what I have said; and others might even listen and consider changing their behavior.** “I feel frightened when I have not heard from you by the expected time because I need to know that you are safe.” “I feel upset when I see clothes and books all over the floor because I value neatness and I work hard to keep our home that way.” “I feel angry when I hear you say mean things to your brother because I want so much for you to support and care for each other.”

Effective and healthy communication of anger is a two-way street. **If we learn to pay attention to our own feelings, we may become more willing to hear and understand the feelings of others, even when we do not agree.**

Resources for Healthy and Effective Communication of Anger

Anger: Handling a Powerful Emotion in a Healthy Way, by Gary Chapman (Chicago: Northfield Publishing, 2007). Chapman provides clear strategies for acknowledging our anger and choosing positive and loving ways to respond. Each of the thirteen chapters concludes with “Quick Takes,” a list of brief statements summarizing the chapter’s teaching. The Discussion Guide offers Questions for Discussion, Thoughts for Reflection, and Options for Application.

Love and Anger in Marriage, by David Mace (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1982). In this classic guide to a healthy marriage, the author describes the physiological process by which a threat perceived by one or more of our five senses triggers physical reactions, sometimes even before we are consciously aware of it. “Anger, therefore, is a spontaneous response, below the level of the conscious mind, to a danger signal, real or imagined. At the incipient stage it is entirely outside my control. I am not responsible for it, but only for how I

respond to it.” (p. 32-33) Both venting and suppressing anger can harm a relationship and the persons in it. Only by processing the anger in a pro-active attempt to discover its causes and make adjustments can the persons involved find solutions that will strengthen and deepen a relationship.

Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life 3rd Edition, (previously *A Language of Compassion*), by Marshall B. Rosenberg, Ph.D. (Encinitas, CA: PuddleDancer Press, 2015). This clear and straight-forward text shows how to break through patterns of thinking that lead to arguments and how to communicate with mutual respect and understanding. The skills (separating observation from evaluation, taking responsibility for our feelings, making requests instead of demands, and listening empathically) can enhance any relationship. You can also order related books addressing a variety of topics for parents, teachers, community leaders, and others at www.nonviolentcommunication.com.

Nonviolent Communication Companion Workbook: A Practical Guide for Individual, Group, or Classroom Study by Lucy Leu (Encinitas, CA: Puddledancer Press, 2003). This workbook provides helpful information for organizing and leading a class or study group on Nonviolent Communication. Discussion questions and exercises for each of the fourteen chapters in the above text enhance individual or group study by applying the concepts and practicing the skills.

What’s Making You Angry? 10 Steps to Transforming Anger So Everyone Win, by Shari Klein and Neill Gibson (La Crescenta, CA: Puddledancer Press, 2005). This 30-page booklet presents a clear process for understanding and dealing with anger. By identifying the experience that triggered your anger, determining your underlying unmet needs, owning your thinking, identifying and taking positive actions toward meeting your needs, and connecting with the feelings and needs of others, you can participate in a “dance of communication” by making clear requests and agreements. The booklet includes practice pages for recording your steps, the Nonviolent Communication (NVC) chart of feelings and needs, and an annotated list of other NVC resources.

www.cnvc.org – Visit this website and click on “How to Use This Site” to find scheduled training events, certified trainers, organizations, practice groups and more.

www.nonviolentcommunication.com – Video and online articles at this website explain the concepts and practice of Nonviolent Communication. You can sign up for enewsletters and purchase resources in addition to accessing free material.

www.nvctraining.com – This website offers both free and fee-based resources, tools, webinars, and teleconferences. Free resources include Weekly NVC Reflections, NVC Training Videos, and Online Classes. See also <http://www.nonviolentcommunication.com/aboutnvc/aboutnvc.htm>

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