

Anger

by [Robert Lewis](#) (August 2023)



Expulsion of the Money-changers from the Temple (detail), Giotto, 1304-06

Usually when people are sad, they don't do anything. They just cry over their condition. But when they get angry, they bring about a change. –Malcolm X

The vegetative world does not experience anger. It is strictly passive, subject to the whims of nature, and appetites and manipulations of all higher orders of species—in particular *Homo sapiens*.

Despite the ever growing society of the incurably disillusioned (generation Zen) for whom being at one with the universe is the end of human striving, who consider anger a

learned, i.e., culturally transmitted emotion that must be unlearned in order to reach a higher state of being, anger is in fact a vital evolutionary mechanism without which Homo sapiens would be Homo sapiens extinctus.

How we deal with anger varies from culture to culture, but given the suddenness of its appearance and its immediate numbing effect on rational thinking and discourse, the customs and laws of every land make provisions on how to deal with it especially when it impinges on the rights of others.

The emotion of anger, in and of itself, is a summons to act, to intervene, to assert, to correct. As such, it is servant to both good and bad ends.

The emotion is pure DNA, and draws its first breath not long after the newborn exits the womb and begins to cry as its sole means of drawing attention to its immediate needs and appetites.

“The Child is the Father of the Man,” are Words worth repeating. Certain aspect of human nature can be tamed—caged, if you will—but anger is its own command center and servant. Anger management experts maintain that the average adult gets angry fifteen times per day. (About which some wag has quipped: Happily married couples 20 times per day)

Seeing that the emotion is innate, we ask: What is its evolutionary purpose? How does it serve the species? What kind of species would we be without it?

Anger, almost without exception, erupts when an expectation or outcome doesn't materialize: a friend doesn't show up for a planned get-together, I drop and smash a valuable crystal flower vase, an expected salary increase doesn't come through. Since we cannot be content or happy while experiencing anger, the emotion begs to be diffused, and we are richly rewarded upon success: neural transmitters release either one or a combination of serotonin, endorphins, dopamine and oxytocin

(the love hormone) into the brain. When anger takes over the mind, the transmission is disrupted.

As nature intends, our unmediated response to anger, that incubus-like invades both mind and body, is to get rid of it; and that is mostly done through precise and deliberate action or inaction. I happily snuff out the life of the mosquito whose proboscis has pierced a blood vessel; I arrange for a faster Internet connection; overcome with self-loathing, I decide to learn a trade to better provide for my family.

Like a musician frustrated over a sequence of notes or a writer struggling to get a sentence right, as a measure of the time-human capital—we devote to working through and processing our anger, what we value in life is made more explicit, and that includes the many angers we rightfully refuse to incorporate into our vital labours.

There are two general categories of anger: directed at ourselves or at the persons or situations that trigger it.

The philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche writes in *Thus Spake Zarathustra*: “The Superman despises himself the most.” Without self-directed anger there can be no self-improvement. Self-directed anger, like the poorly understood emotion of envy, invites us to recognize a superiority or advantage we wish to make our own. Nietzsche understood that if we like ourselves as we are, we will remain as we are. If I’m content with my poor understanding of a second language I am trying to learn, my language skills won’t improve. After feeling marginalized in a discussion on a subject about which my understanding is limited, my anger, self-directed, creates the conditions that encourage me to become better informed, and at the same time better integrated into the group discussion, thereby fulfilling an important social need.

If we all can be better than what we are, nature encourages us to exploit the readily available emotion of anger—our

dissatisfaction with ourselves and/or the world as it turns—to get us there.

Anger at the world, at the way things are, motivates us to change the world, where the change often results in a collective diffusing of anger. I am angry that the lights on a major thoroughfare are not synchronized such that during rush hour 500 cars are forced to stop at every light, causing unnecessary vehicular wear and further polluting the air. Recognizing that it is in everyone's interest that I defuse the anger, I decide to enter my upset into the public domain through social networking, while gathering a sufficient number signatures that will, in theory, eventually grant me—or the collective—an audience with the persons responsible for municipal transport, who, after reviewing the content of the protest, decide that it is indeed in the best interest of the electorate and public perception of the political party effecting the change that the lights be synchronized. So a citizenry, angered at the way things are, and having acted upon its anger, is rewarded. Anger, properly understood and channeled, results in betterment, improvement and advancement over the way things are.

However, as we all know there are many situations in life that are out of our control, but over which we nonetheless get angry. To mention one of global reach: rush hour traffic that advances slower than glue oozing out of tube. Without a control mechanism, anger tends to inwardly seethe (implode) or morph into resentment or irrational behaviour that can turn violent. If allowed to smolder indefinitely, it can take hold of both body and mind like a set of clenched jaws that won't let go.

How does a mother manage her anger towards the drunk driver who has killed her child, or the laws of the land that reward the driver with a suspended sentence? What is to be done about the anger caused by a weather-ruined vacation, or the anger-
envy we hold against those who are more successful or talented

than ourselves? The only pragmatic response to anger that cannot be defused is to submit the emotion to our faculties of reason, whose mandate will be to convince us to let it go and move on. As someone once said, the three most important words in a relationship are not "I love you," but "let it go." Part of the maturation process that occurs during the course of a lifetime is training the mind to overrule our raw emotions when reason demonstrates the futility of surrendering to them.

As to those who insist that anger is not innate but a cultural acquisition, and who claim they no longer experience anger, they have, by choice, taken on the likeness of the invertebrate vegetative world. They have convinced themselves that abject passivity is the end goal of personal development, and accept things the way they are, however unjust or self-demeaning. They conveniently confuse emotional paralysis for higher being and usually end up being the fodder for someone else's cause or ambition or disposition to abuse. Wholly lacking in volition, in ego, they aspire to non-being, and en masse they resemble a procession of the walking-dead. Cults and evil thrive on their kind. They are the raw material the powerful prey upon: the pawns, the foot-soldiers in ready service of another's grand design. In pursuit of a sham serenity, they void themselves of their values, their dignity and self-respect. And after having disburdened themselves of all responsibility towards themselves, they are the last to suspect they have become the poster people of a nihilism whose endgame is the devaluation of all value. When they look into the mirror they see the backs of their heads and instead of getting angry at what they see they reach for their combs.

Anger is first and foremost the species-specific refusal to accept things the way they are. Anger is the opening gambit in the quest for transcendence. Every civilizational advancement is predicated on anger, a critique of the world as it is. When we lose someone in their prime due to incurable illness, our

anger becomes the catalyst to finding a cure.

Anger is the 'ways and means' by which we address all that is wrong with the way things are with you and me and the world we have confected.

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