

On Escaping the Stress of Anger

I was driving last week on a big highway in Michigan, doing a bit more than 80 miles an hour in the left-hand lane, when I noticed a run-down looking sedan pull up behind my SUV and begin to tailgate quite closely. As I was going considerably faster than the traffic in the middle and right lanes (not to mention faster than the speed limit), I was not eager to slow down and shift lanes to the right just to let this rude person go by me at 95. After about 30 seconds, he forced his way in front of a car to my right, and then squeezed around and in front of me. He then began tail-gaiting the next car in line, but not before hitting his brakes briefly to make me hit mine, and then flipping me “the bird”. I became quite angry. I’m not generally an angry guy – in fact I consider it a worthwhile goal to avoid being angry all together, but I got really mad. Visions of pushing his car off the road from behind, shooting out tires, and other absurd fantasies to show this idiot what he could and couldn’t do ran through my head. After all, this behavior was unreasonable, and was dangerous to myself and perhaps others to boot. Who did this guy think he was?

As measured in a medical laboratory, anger is one of the most stressful states humans can experience; only substantial fear is equally stressful or worse. Blood pressure soars, pupils dilate, heart rate and breathing are rapid, and stress hormones pour into our bloodstream identically for each emotion - as if anger and fear were completely interchangeable as far as our bodies are concerned. They are also related in this way: both involve a belief that we have lost control over what is happening around us. Something or someone is keeping us apart from some condition that we believe will make us happy. We become concerned that we will now be unable to shape events favorably for our own well-being. We say things like: “If that person would only do this instead of that, I could be happy.” In fact, we become angry at people when they don’t behave they way we think they should in order to fit our view of how the world should work. We say, “That person made me so mad”, as if that was the intention of someone you encountered who had sufficient power to hurt you, and then deliberately set about doing so. It implies that we are powerless to control the way we respond. I felt all of these things as I was driving, and didn’t like them at all. I began to wonder if there was any way I could feel good again, as I was just a few minutes earlier on this bright sunny afternoon.

The conscious decision that we no longer want to feel angry is the essential first step towards escaping the state of anger. It may sound surprising to hear, but all of us make the decision to remain angry at times, even if there is an obvious resolution to our anger available to us. We grow up hearing and believing “it doesn’t matter what you want” from our parents and our peers, but in fact this isn’t true at all. Our choices are very powerful indeed. If anger is what we want, anger is what we will succeed in having, because we will make every effort to overlook what would cause the anger to dissipate. Our awareness of these choices can be very subtle or non-existent – we are masters at suppressing what we do not wish ourselves or others to examine in the plain light of day. If we did not hide our desire to deliberately remain angry, we would be forced to give up what we want to seem justified and beyond our control. My first decision had to be that I wanted a state of serenity to replace my anger – I had to truly want to let the anger go.

Next, I needed a practical way to let that shift take place inside of me as I continued my drive. One way to avoid stress is to change the outside world to remove the stressor. In my case, I could have chosen to let the other driver pass me on the left immediately instead of holding my ground. That's actually a very smart approach for a couple of reasons. But having made my choices and experienced their consequences, I now needed a different avenue for escaping my anger. This second way involved changing my thoughts about the person who was "making" me angry.

Anger is at the very least unpleasant, and at worst a form of insanity. If I was this angry after just one brief encounter with another driver, I could imagine what state of mind this other fellow must be experiencing for hours or even days at a time. To be so angry that one would choose to pick repeated confrontations with other drivers (and very likely strangers in other situations as well) is to live in a kind of hell – literally. I had just met someone who was trapped in a mode of existence I would wish on nobody – to be continually angry is to be continuously suffering as well. Worse yet, there is no end in sight for that person's unhappiness, because they endlessly manufacture more suffering for themselves by their very choice to remain angry. And with this insight, a small miracle occurred – I noticed the anger level dropping in my mind, like water going down a drain. It was replaced by compassion for someone I now understood to be stuck in an insane world, with no clue of how to escape, or even that the key to their release was in their own hands. Rather than wanting to increase the amount of pain in their world in revenge for the pain they caused in mine, I now wanted something different for both of us.

How do we help someone in a situation like this one? The answer is to teach them that there are other worlds for people to experience than the one they currently inhabit. How can we teach this lesson to an angry person at 80 miles an hour (or whatever scenario we find ourselves in)? It is taught by not joining them in their anger as they want you to do. Angry people expect you to become angry too, because it is exactly what they would do if the situation were reversed. By showing (even for a few brief seconds) that you live in a world where you see things in a way that allows you to remain calm no matter what happens around you, you forcibly remind them that this is possible for them as well (after all, you're both just people, aren't you?). What better gift could you give someone stuck in an angry world than this? And there is a wonderful side-effect of this giving you cannot avoid – that which you give away must also become yours regardless of how somebody else receives it from you. Your gift to them is literally your gift to yourself. The more you give it away, the more deeply it must be in your possession to make use of whenever you have need of it.

The Short Version: One way of escaping the stress of anger is to shift your mental viewpoint so that you understand that the person you are angry at is actually living in a very uncomfortable world of their own. They are almost certainly suffering from fear (and ignorance about why and how to escape it) far worse than your own. Let this understanding of their internal distress give rise to profound relief that you don't have to live that way too, and then let that relief show itself as a lesson in balance and compassion for others given by you to whoever is there to observe (including yourself!).