

The Gift of Anger

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Sex and anger! It is said that in our culture, these are the two most difficult issues. Certainly, in a relationship, both have great potential for negative consequences if not handled well. And yet, both have the potential to bring great rewards and growth. Our subject here is not sex, but anger, and what it can teach us. I want to share the stories of two people and how learning to accept the gift of anger removed major barriers and brought great richness back into their lives. (I have changed their names and identifying information.)

Anger at Work

Paul was the Corporate Director of a major department in a Fortune 500 company. He had risen slowly but steadily up the corporate ladder, improving the performance of several departments as he rose. However, there were little blemishes on his record: a harassment complaint, rumors of temper tantrums, and grumbling about unfair treatment in his departments. No one ever discussed these with Paul, however, until one day he was overheard by a colleague from another department screaming and swearing at his managers in a staff meeting. After that incident, he was told in a painful meeting with the Corporate HR Director that his behavior was

"career limiting." He recommended coaching to Paul to "learn to manage his anger."

Paul acknowledged at the beginning of our coaching that he'd had a problem with anger all his life -- that he got the same feedback at home that he did at work. But to him, his anger was a mystery. It seemed to come out of nowhere and simply take him over. He had no sense of the gradations, such as mild irritation, or annoyance. He had no sense of how one annoying incident -- perhaps on the drive to work -- would set the stage for a blow-up at work hours later that would be completely out of proportion to the event.

So we began an exploration -- an expedition into Paul's anger. Paul began an Anger Journal: he kept track of times he became aware of anything from mild annoyance to raging fury. He learned to notice how his body felt as he got angry -- the tightening of his facial muscles, the tension in his stomach, the way his breathing became more shallow and rapid. He learned to feel how his face would begin to get hot. His assignment at this point was to excuse himself for a moment and write in his journal what he noticed in his body, to identify what it was about, and to list three possible options for how to handle it. Paul began to see a pattern: he learned that his tension started when he felt a loss of control. Someone else had the ball and was going to run with it. It was up to him to either get the ball back or, at the very least, block that run!

Fear of losing control is a very common cause of anger. Concern that someone else has the power and could hurt or humiliate you in some way leads to a build-up of tension that seeks release. Unchecked, it can often lead to a blow-up. Paul's expedition into the

causes of his anger gave him the freedom to explore what was going on for him. The journaling had the effect of slowing things down -- of providing Paul with a vehicle to release some tension, but also to step back. He could achieve a broader view of himself and explore his options. The result? Paul found he had a choice -- he didn't need to blindly respond to the build-up of tension in his body. He could decide whether he really was losing his power and respond more appropriately. If someone cut him off on the way to work, he could see that

in fact he had no control there, but his goal was to get to work safely. Having this awareness helped him let go of the tension so he didn't carry it in to work.

Hidden Anger

Patty's problem was different. Married for six years with 2 small children, she was plagued by headaches and frequent muscle spasms in her back and neck. Often in pain, she was impatient with her children. Her husband insisted on a peaceful, smooth-running house. Both his and Patty's parents had divorced, and they had promised each other that they could not end up the same way.

Our expedition into Patty's anger helped her to discover that she was certain that if she got angry she would no longer be lovable; she would be abandoned and alone. Anger was dangerous, so she squelched it. But anger has a way -- like water -- of leaking out. If it doesn't come out directly -- if we stuff it in -- it will come out in some other way. For Patty, it was headaches and other physical complaints. For others, it can be overeating, substance abuse, aggressive driving.

Step 1 for Patty was learning to acknowledge to herself that she felt angry. Through her exploration, she learned that even her anger was a stand-in: underneath her anger, she felt hurt and alone. Her husband went off to work each day and came home each night to a peaceful, smooth-running house. She, on the other hand, dealt with the children, did the cooking and cleaning, and did her best to create a haven for her husband. She missed having a partner.

Step 2 was to find a way to share with her husband what she felt -- including her yearning to be more intimate and to have a more satisfying partnership. As they began some problem-solving sessions and Patty began to experiment with asking for what she wanted, her headaches began to subside. While it had been easier to many was to be angry and to keep it inside rather than see what lie underneath and try to address it, she was paying a high price.

The Gift of Anger

Anger can be a message -- a signal that something is going on beneath the surface. Whether it is fear or loss of control, fear of abandonment, feelings of powerlessness, fear of loss of love or something else entirely -- it takes great courage to look for that message and to face the choices that it offers. This is the gift of anger. It offers the possibility of

exploring and coming to know ourselves more fully. When we learn to use the gift of anger, we can step more fully into our true self. This is a gift to us and to everyone in our lives.