

Anger Management

By Paul Penner

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Anger has many faces. Some of those faces aren't pretty. Have you ever seen road rage? A few years ago I was driving in Winnipeg minding my own business and a truck quickly pulled up beside me. The driver was gesturing to me with his middle finger. He was making facial gestures too, and saying things that I could tell were not flattering. I couldn't hear him, but his lips and facial expressions were similar to the kind of face you see on TV when NHL hockey players think they got an undeserved penalty and their faces screw up and the camera picks up on the words they are mouthing (they are not nice words). At first I thought that this guy must be mistaken, being so angry at me. I looked around to see if there was somebody else who I might be in line with. But there was no one else. He was furious at me.

I looked away. I could tell he still had more he wanted to say, and that he wanted me to hear every word. My mind raced. I was feeling very uncomfortable. What could I have done to make this guy so mad? I couldn't recall doing anything that might provoke anyone. I wasn't weaving in and out of traffic... I wasn't passing foolishly or holding people up by driving slow in the passing lane (like people do between Morden and Winkler...). I reasoned that this guy must have mistaken my car for someone else's, and was just misdirecting his anger onto me. At that point something I hadn't counted on happened. A red light had slowed traffic and we were coming to a halt. I checked in the side view mirror and sure enough this guy was getting out of his truck and walking fast toward my car. Whoa... I am in big trouble! Fortunately the light turned green and traffic started to move. Phew! Now I was driving in a way which should have provoked everyone to anger and got me a ticket. I was weaving in and out in order to get away fast. I am not going to tell you how this story ended – okay, just a hint, I lost him somehow. I hope none of you have to be on the receiving end of this kind of anger. It's scary! But most of you will probably experience unreasonable anger in some form whether at home or in the workplace.

Like I said, anger has many faces. Consider the different words we use for anger (in addition to the word anger)... irritation, frustration, being provoked, hatred, fury, resentment, rage, jealousy, contempt, bitterness and others. All of these have anger as their common ingredient. Each of these has a slightly different nuance and therefore we don't use these words to describe how we or someone else is feeling randomly – they require a specific context which makes it the particular word to use when describing a specific kind of anger emotion.

Hatred is what we feel when someone has, in our perception, stolen our 'life' (what we are depending on for personal wellbeing). It is right that we would feel hatred toward the enemy of our soul – Satan who conspired to steal away our life. We are to hate evil.

Jealousy is the emotion we feel when what is exclusively ours (like a spouse, or our role as parents) is being shared with someone else who doesn't have that role. God is a jealous God. Our spirit belongs to Him alone. He is jealous for what belongs exclusively to Him.

We are **angered** when someone or something blocks a goal we believe we need to achieve. Sometimes beliefs about our needs are inaccurate – but once we believe, right or wrong, we will express those beliefs in actions and feel the emotions of how life is cooperating with our perceived needs.

We feel **frustrated** when a desire (*a desire is defined as an objective that can not be achieved through effort alone. This means that we are dependent on someone or circumstances to cooperate with our desire*) is thwarted. **Irritation** is felt when demands are being imposed on us, which exceed our felt resources to manage or respond to.

We feel **indignant**, even **incensed** in reaction to intentional violations of dignity or personal property. We feel **outraged** at injustice towards an innocent victim, and **enraged** when those in power deny justice to the someone who has been wronged. And so we should. But to attain the standards of love, our desire for justice needs to be tempered against the need to show and experience mercy.

We feel **resentment** towards those who abandon their role, or are indifferent to the needs their role serves in our lives. Like when a parent walks out on a dependent child or spouse. We feel **bitterness** when we prefer resentment over restoring a broken relationship.

It probably would be good to imagine contexts where you feel these emotions to see how they fit with the definitions I have provided. How many of the above emotions can you identify with? Just as it is important to recognize the emotions we are feeling, so too is the ability to use the knowledge of what we are feeling to discern unmet needs emotions reflect. All feelings reflect how, in our perception, life is cooperating with our desires. The more important a desire, the more intense we will feel about it. Good listening recognizes this aspect of emotions and uses it to build relationship by acknowledging the emotions being felt and seeking to understand the source without passing judgement on the person disclosing it. This helps people open up and defuse the impact of negative emotions.

Reflect on the emotions that you feel during this next week. Examine them to see if you can identify what you are feeling (*name what you are feeling*), and how, in your perception, life is cooperating with desires on which you place significance. If you like, you can think of emotions like dash light indicators in your car. When an indicator is flashing or signalling alarm, it means that something needs your attention. Emotions are like that.

Insight into emotions can help us understand ourselves, as well as others better. Negative emotions reveal that in our perception some kind of need is not being met. We need to either somehow meet that need, re-evaluate our perceptions, or accept disappointment – but some kind of response needs to be made. At this point most people typically, I believe, make

their choice on how to respond primarily without reflection. What most people assume is that negative emotions are to be avoided and pleasant emotions are to be pursued. But that would be like disabling the car dash indicator without investigating to see why it is on. A better response is to examine what is needed and make thoughtful choices in order to effectively meet the need behind the emotional cue. The heart of a man is deep and it takes wisdom to understand it and draw it out (but it is wisdom we can learn).

A lot of anger violates love (ie. “the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God” – James 1:20) which suggests to me that really we value justice more than mercy. Secondly, a lot of anger reflects demanded desires (*which places a high value on ourselves*) rather than patience (*which places a high value on relationship building*). Thirdly, I believe that a lot of anger reflects personal woundedness which has not been examined and understood (nor healed) and is being misdirected onto others who are not responsible for the intensity of emotion being expressed. As with all topics there is always more that could be said.

Misdirected and disproportionate anger can damage relationships and usually does. But with acquired insight it can be understood, defused and stripped of its power to control us.