

Anger, Revenge, Injustice

At first sight one aspect of anger is easy to understand, and it is perhaps the most common cause of it. This is the aspect which is related to justice and injustice. Few things are more calculated to arouse our anger than the conviction that somebody or some company or institution, acted or intended to act in a way which deprives us of what we feel to be our right to do something: something the same or something different to what the other person intended.

Here is a commonplace, everyday example of this. I am patiently holding back to allow a fellow motorist to drive out of a parking space he has been occupying, when a fellow in front of me also stops his car, and as soon as the other motorist drives away he adroitly backs into the space I am just about to drive into. How dare he! Didn't he SEE that I was politely waiting for the space-occupier to drive away so that I could drive into his space? I had EARNED my right to that place - he just snatched it! I glare furiously at him as I honk my horn and sweep past him. I can see by the abashed smirk on his or her face that he is really quite pleased with himself. "I did that very neatly didn't I," he is probably saying to himself, "HE'LL just have to find himself another space - hah hah!"

One-upmanship too - the injustice of THAT. Tempting ME to find a way of getting my own back: tempting me to take revenge. Taking revenge just about accounts for the nature of most human conflict. All the better if you think you've got God on your side: but if you don't think this it hardly matters. We'll get our revenge anyway Revenge is sweet, and we must taste it.

WHY must we taste it? As I began by saying this aspect of anger is easy to understand. We have a sense of injustice, of fairness (not altogether the same thing by the way) and we are quick to respond when someone offends it: when someone as we feel, slights our ego, wounds our pride. But consider the following situation.

In Hemel Hempstead they have a peculiar traffic-island. As you approach it the unusual demarcation lines on the tarmac make it clear that the usual "give way to traffic coming from the right side" law doesn't seem to apply. Everyone else approaching the island from different directions is also hesitating like you, waiting to see if the other fellow is edging forward; If he is, you have the choice of either letting him go, holding back, or risk lurching forward into his carriage work.

When they first changed the restrictions on this junction, my old friend Ben Glean who at that time was a road engineer in Hemel Hempstead. said his office was inundated with protest calls: "Have you all gone mad!" they exclaimed: "We're all risking terrible accidents there because there is no clear indication of what we should do". Naturally Ben's department anticipated this indignant response, but they just took in a deep breath and replied: "It's an experiment. Please give it ten days, and then see what happens". The offended drivers did - they had to - and in ten days what at first had seemed total chaos settled down to register an astonishingly lower accident rate at that island than had ever been known before. How exactly did that come about? Simply it seems by removing every driver's conviction of his priority. Then the way forward has to be considered, negotiated. You have for instance, to try and actually make eye-contact with your fellow drivers, and practice courtesy, forbearance and restraint, which have to take the place of aggression, wilful self-assertion, self-righteous anger.

Of course it hasn't converted the real dyed-in-the-wool ego-tripper, but even he or she has to slow down and hold back in case he too gets driven into I understand they are now taking this principle of traffic-island management even further in parts of Holland, by trying the experiment of abolishing ALL traffic restrictions - yes, even traffic-lights. It will be interesting to see what happens then, won't it?

But what about the more difficult, devastating causes of anger? Could the same principles of restraint, forbearance even loving consideration still apply? If a neighbour brutally, callously kills my pet dog or cat - or in different circumstances - even my relative or child, isn't my anger, my desire for revenge amply justified NOW? Most of us I suppose would think so. But let's try to apply the holding-back principle even here. What do we really KNOW about what prompts someone else, someone who was once a helpless baby like ourselves, to do an evil act of this sort? What is evil anyway? Is it something inalienable to the human condition? Is it like a devastating form of cancer which can never be eradicated from the human personality?

As soon as we stop trying to understand, and stop acting in a spirit of loving consideration (can I now say "loving-kindness", "compassion"?) all we have left is indignation, anger, the desire for revenge. This is our choice; this is what God gave to us - the terrible responsibility for making choices in the way we act. Of course Determinists will always try to duck out of this awful responsibility by exclaiming - "We CAN'T choose. If we knew enough we'd find it's all determined!" "What?" we may reply: "Even our capacity to love, to give and receive love? Are you telling us that we HAVE to love our children, our friends, our lovers, wives, husbands - or else lose out in the famous evolutionary battle for survival? But don't we all know that the

multiplicity of choices involved in the various manifestations of love are far more complex and subtle than the simple assertion of a so-called mating or maternal instinct?"

Of course we recognise there are parameters of choice in any particular situation which restrict our area of choice. But perhaps even these may be dissolved or set aside through the transformation which loving- consideration (compassion) works upon us?

Transformation - that's the possibility to set beside justice and injustice, revenge and anger. Because we are humans we are capable of becoming transformed; of having our awareness of the situation we are in expanded well beyond the parameters of unfairness, justice - injustice. The apostle Paul discovered this, and we all know it. Deep in our hearts we know we can be transformed.

What blocks this then? Why can't we experience it more often? I think we all know the answer to this too. Because we are afraid to take risks, to be more open and vulnerable to those around us - not just those we "ought" to feel safe with, our family members and friends. Perhaps above all because we fear rejection, of looking foolish, of feeling more isolated than we were before we tried approaching those less familiar to us. So because we are afraid we let our fears get in the way of doing better: and fear, not hatred, is the opposite of love.

So friends, let us all set aside our fears, and allow ourselves to be transformed beyond anger into love.