**“Not Quick To Anger”**

**All of us have heard of “road rage.” Many of us have experienced it as well: the rising tide of irritation when you’re in a hurry and the driver in the car ahead seems to have one foot constantly on the brake, the flash of hot emotion when a skateboarder is recklessly weaving in and out of city traffic. I felt it when a carload of teenage boys sped past me on the right as I was coming into town one day, honking their horn, leering from the windows and giving me the finger. They’d probably been drinking. For one moment, until my better instincts kicked in, I could think of nothing but racing after those hooligans and giving them a piece of my mind. Then I realized that taking on half a dozen ugly drunks probably wouldn’t be a good idea. I let it go, and went my way. Fortunately, I’ve never encountered the kind of vehicular violence that took place in Alabaster, Alabama.**

**Both of the drivers were middle-aged, middle-class women, definitely not adolescents high on testosterone. Gena Foster was racing to pick up her 4-year old daughter Francie from her after school program for children with cerebral palsy. Shirley Henson, age forty, was on her way home to her husband and dogs in a quiet cul-de-sac outside Atlanta. But when Foster’s Pontiac Grand Prix cut in front of Henson’s Toyota 4-Runner at the on-ramp to Interstate 65, it started a game of high stakes chicken--tailgating, lane-changing, and slamming on brakes--until the two cars pulled off at the same exit four miles down the road. When Gena Foster got out of her car and began walking back toward the SUV, waving her arms and yelling, Ms. Henson reached into the console where she kept her .38 revolver. When the gesticulating woman reached the car door, Henson lowered the window and shot Foster in the head.**

**Callers to a local radio show were surprisingly sympathetic to the murderer. “If I’m in my car and somebody comes running up, I sure would shoot them. I’m sorry, but that’s just the way it’s gonna be,” said one woman, who seemed to speak for many. Almost half the callers to one Birmingham talk show looked at it as a case of self-defense. If the dead woman didn’t exactly get what she deserved, they seemed to say, she at least might have seen it coming.**

**Incidents like this are increasing. The most aggressive driving seems to be the suburbs, where sprawl has turned roads into parking lots and parking lots into recipes for frustration. The tone is reflected in the bumper stickers drivers display on their fenders: Unless you’re a hemorrhoid, get off my ass!**

**But why are people so angry? Our politics resembles a shouting match. Shock jocks on the radio compete to offend. The legal system encourages each of us to believe we must have some world-class grievance. I think part of it has to do with machinery, and with the pace of modern life. People have been promised that technology will make their lives easier--email, cell phones--and are surprised when the gadgets that were supposed to make life a snap turn out to be rather complicated instead. They’ve been told they can have instant gratification, and are impatient when they find out there’s a long line of people standing in front of them who are also eager to get it. I turn ugly when I get those long recorded messages on the phone: *“for scheduling, press one, to make a reservation, press two, if you’d like to speak to a real live, human being, forget it!”* I fume at my computer. People who are wedded closely to machines (and that includes most of us) may have a tendency to become more machine-like themselves: less flexible, more rigid, and unthinking.**

**The modern world does give people plenty of good reasons to be angry, of course. The employee who sees the pension he was promised and earned evaporate, and the wife who gets traded-in for a younger model may have good reasons to be furious. Life is not always kind or fair. The middle-aged guy who’s never smoked and just suffered his first heart attack, the woman whose been passed over for promotion at work and is being paid less than what she’s worth, the black family that can’t get a home mortgage, may all have legitimate grounds for feeling resentful.**

**Anger has its place. Evolution designed the surge of adrenalin that makes us clench our fists and grind our teeth for a purpose, after all: to protect us against a hostile environment, to ward off threats to our survival, to rouse our bodies in readiness for fight or flight. Anger was highly adaptive in the stone age world where the human brain originated. A good loud shout just might scare off that saber-toothed tiger lurking outside the cave. The trouble is that anger is far less useful now, when insults to our pride and injuries to out vanity are far more common than any real assaults on our physical well-being.**

**If only there were a “serenity prayer” for anger! “God, help me to get mad at the things that need to be changed, and grant me patience to accept the small stuff that I should just laugh off, and give me the wisdom to know the difference.” How many of us manage to get up a good head of steam when it comes to fighting childhood poverty, or confronting racism or other forms of injustice? A sense of moral outrage is necessary, and yet even righteous indignation can be overdone. It’s such an easy pose to stand in judgment of others, so much easier than contrition or forgiveness. And because our indignation is overworked, it also tends to be misdirected. So often we choose to be angry at the wrong things, allow ourselves to become upset by trivial annoyances, work a minor flap into a major conflict, spend our energies looking for reasons to feel aggrieved or take offense.**

**Sad to say, a lot of pop psychology encourages us, when we’re feeling vexed, to give vent to our most vengeful and vitriolic impulses. Be in touch with your feelings. Express yourself. Don’t hold in your anger, we are told. Don’t try to check your tongue when tempted to make a sarcastic comment to your pesky mother-in-law. Go ahead and make that cheeky reply. For suppressing anger is presumably one of the worst things we can do. Holding in your rage can have devastating physical consequences, causing (depending on who you listen to) drowsiness or insomnia, anorexia or overeating, diarrhea or constipation, depression, nervous excitability and a host of other contradictory symptoms. If repressing anger means nursing a grudge, acting sweet on the outside awhile seething on the inside, being two-faced, and biding your time while secretly plotting revenge, it probably is enough to give you a stomachache. But most actual research shows that expressing hostility is far more likely to raise your blood pressure than bottling up the shout that’s waiting to get out.**

**The truth is that expressing your anger is not always conducive to good health. Ventilating rage on the roadway was what got Shirley Henson charged with homicide, and Gena Foster killed. Even when the consequences aren’t so dire, they can be permanent and painful. I recall a conversation with a man came in for counseling who had just lost his girlfriend. Upset that she wanted to start seeing other men, he’d written a letter in the heat of passion, giving voice to all the jealousy and bitterness that was churning inside. Now she refused to answer his letters or return his calls. How could he get her back? I had to tell the man that he had made a serious error, that it’s almost never a good idea to mail a nasty letter, for once hurtful words have been put to paper, there’s no way to retrieve them. Unfettered anger can destroy relationships and undermine trust.**

**Yet there are occasions when expressing anger is the quickest way to get results. My mother, for instance, had an eccentric friend who knew just how to push other people’s buttons. He was in a fancy French restaurant one time, and couldn’t get served. All the waiters were deliberately ignoring him, enough to get anyone riled. He simply took his napkin and put it on his head like a floppy hat. The other patrons stared, but the service improved dramatically! Sometimes it takes a well-placed threat--”take my order or I’m going to act like a boor”--to get other people to pay attention.**

**But that’s highly focused anger, as carefully calibrated as a karate chop, which is quite different than simply blowing off steam. There’s a mistaken notion that the best policy when feeling mad is to get it off your chest. Take the lid off the volcano. Catharsis is supposed to release pent-up emotions and lower the temperature, like the safety-valve on a boiler. Unfortunately, people aren’t teakettles, and the theory doesn’t work. Encourage a group of children who are starting to get rowdy to play even more aggressively, and it doesn’t calm them down. Just the opposite. Generally speaking, the more people stomp and yell, the more agitated they become.**

**Maybe that’s why most religious traditions have issued strong cautions concerning flaring tempers. In Christianity, wrath is among the seven deadly sins, along with gluttony, avarice, and the rest--deadly not because they contradict church teaching or offend against some arbitrary and antiquated moral code but because they corrode the soul and interfere with the full enjoyment of life. “Of the seven deadly sins, anger is possibly the most fun,” observes Frederick Buechner. “To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll over your tongue the prospect of bitter confrontations still to come, to savor to the last toothsome morsel both the pain you are given and the pain you are giving back--in many ways it is a feast fit for a king. The chief drawback is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is you.”**

**Buddhists are possibly even stronger in urging self-restraint. “When you give in to aversion and anger,” says one Tibetan teacher, “it’s as though, having decided to kill someone by throwing him into a river, you wrap your arms around his neck, jump into the water with him, and you both drown. In destroying your enemy, you destroy yourself as well.” Thich Nat Hahn says that an angry person is like a man with his house on fire. It doesn’t do him any good to focus on who made him angry, or who started the blaze. The first order of business is to put out the flames.**

**But how do we put out the flames? Anger can sometimes feel like a conflagration that’s out of control, all-consuming, smoldering quietly or burning hotly by turns but almost impossible to quench. It is a primitive, powerful emotion. Once, I recall, I was stewing and simmering for months, grouchy, defensive, ready to find fault, partly angry for reasons I could name, but more for reasons I couldn’t identify. The anger began to feel habitual, almost like a drug, a fixation I wanted to get rid of but couldn’t quite shake. Then a friend who has a kidney transplant like me told me that it might be the medications I take. It’s a side effect of prednisone, he said, and there’s even a clinical name for it: prednisone rage. Something about that explanation sounded right, for that’s how the anger felt, not so much part of me as an intruder or foreign substance that had taken over my moods. Realistically, the medicine may or may not have been affecting me; I’m actually on a pretty low dose. But thinking of my anger as a chemical imbalance helped me to deal with it, strangely enough. It provided some psychic distance between me and the surliness that had become such an unwelcome companion.**

**Buddhists might call that dis-identifying with the anger. Instead of getting swept into the current of emotion, take a step back and detach. There are simple ways of doing it. The familiar expedient of counting to ten when you’re mad, counting to a hundred when very mad, works for some. Mark Twain said count to ten if angry, if very angry , swear. Perhaps swearing isn’t such good advice, though, for the whole idea is to cool down. If you’re having an argument with your spouse, for instance, give it a rest. Agree to talk when you’re not so mad. Let the storm blow over, and communicate when you’re in a better frame of mind. Your anger may have dissipated, or at least lost its edge, by the next day, but hopefully your marriage will still be there.**

**Madness is a form of madness, as many have pointed out. Anger is a kind of temporary insanity, when we’re liable to behave in irrational and destructive ways. That was the case for Edgar Allen Poe, the great author of mystery and the macabre. One night Poe shared a story he’d written with some friends. Jokingly, they made light of the story’s merits, told Poe that the hero’s name appeared too often, and made other teasing comments. Poe’s irascible nature couldn’t bear such criticism, and in a tantrum, before his friends could stop him, he flung every sheet of the manuscript onto the blazing hearth. Perhaps it was one of Poe’s literary masterpieces, but we’ll never know. His fury passed, but his work was gone forever.**

**“Those whom the god would destroy,” says Euripides “they first make mad.” Or take it from the Bible: “Be not quick to anger, for anger resteth in the bosom of fools.”**