Anger's Two Kinds of Reactivity

With Sarah Peyton

There are two ways that anger can be a problem in relationships: the first is reactive anger – the sudden outbursts of words, temper or action that create a nervous system response in the other; and the second is reaction to anger – in other words, the way that the nervous system that has been startled reacts.

Reactive anger that takes us toward someone in blame is the problem-solving dance of the left hemisphere. It silences and frightens others, and claims power through force.

When my son Nick was 7 years old, I realized that I had an anger problem: I discovered this one morning when I "came to" standing over him and screaming at him. I had been trying to make him get up for school, and I had just pulled him and all his blankets off the bed onto the floor, and he was crumpled in a little, scared heap at my feet. It is not fun to remember this. I split in two, part of me continuing to yell, and part of me looking at myself in horror, thinking, "There must be a better way. This is just wrong."

Starting that moment, I made a commitment to change. I had already found NVC, but I hadn't started using it in my home. I felt a strange combination of being too shy and too resentful to change the way I talked. Every rule I had about surviving in my family of origin told me not to reveal my heart. But in that moment, I realized my old rules weren't working for me anymore. And humbled by care for my little boy, I started to become willing to look at myself, and to speak my vulnerabilities aloud. As I looked, I began to understand that both my live rage and the distant and controlling way I spoke to my family were only faint shadows of the cruel way that I spoke to myself.

To change the way I talked to myself, I had to cultivate a resonating and compassionate self-witness, starting from scratch, with few models to follow. As I began to change the way I spoke to myself, I saw changes in my language with my children, my husband, and my friends. It was a slow transformation. There were some improvements right away, but it took three years for my relationship with my son Nick to change to one of mutual trust and warmth. I had to overcome the first seven years of betrayal of trust and use of force, shaming and manipulation.

For those of us who have hurt others and ourselves with our anger, hot or cold, this is a call to change. The more we release our anger, the better we get at releasing our anger. The more we bring our compassionate and,resonating self-witness to every angry expression we can catch, the better we become at holding ourselves with warmth and defusing and transforming, rather than controlling, our anger.

The voice of self-criticism can be so constant, so much our norm, that it can be difficult to tell that we are being cruel to ourselves. It can also be difficult to tell where to start with self-empathy. Happily, we can start anywhere. And one side benefit of self-empathy for our critical self-witness is the slight edge gallows humor that can be found when we embrace our left hemisphere's insanely inhuman, perfectionist voice with compassion.

An example would be, "Sarah, are you so contemptuous of Sarah's existence that you are never going to speak to her again? Has she crossed your line for social faux pas? Do you feel hopeless, scornful and coldly angry? Are you longing for graceful perfection? Would you like a divorce from Sarah, and would you like to never be seen with her again?"

And then the part of us that is living in shame from having received such contempt may also need some empathy: "Sarah, are you embarrassed and ashamed? Do you long to be held with infinite

mercy for your social awkwardness? Do you need to know that the world is resilient and that you will still be loved, no matter how clumsy you might be? Do you wish that stumbles with words and sentences would be treated as gently and matter-of-factly as accidents being treated by very kind and calm emergency room nurses? Would you like to be able to count on receiving the benefit of the doubt?"

As we begin to bring this level of internal support to our micro-moments of anger, we start to transform our families and our world. When we stop battering ourselves, we stop bullying those around us, and we can begin to reach out and make repairs to those people over whom we have had power.

Examples of unequal power dynamics where we have the responsibility to make repairs include: when we are physically bigger and stronger than the other person; when we are the parent, teacher, employer; or therapist; when we have more money, education, working memory capacity, or control over the finances or survival of the other person; when we are the person who is least invested in the relationship; when we own the resources that are being used; when we have access to more social capital or have more secure attachment. (Please note that sometimes one person has more power in one area, and another has more power in another. This would mean that mutual repairs and dialogues are in order.)

The second kind of reactivity is also something I can own. It is the startle, fear, frozenness, impatience, contempt or anger that arises in me in response to someone else's temper. Even though I am myself guilty of angry outbursts, I have no patience for those of others. In my startle, I want to blame the other person and I would very much like for that person to atone for their actions. This is also an entry point for healing work and transformation. It is important here for me to own the ways in which I have more power in the relationship, and to do what healing work I can that will allow me to continue to breathe fully in the face of the other's anger, and to learn to shift my frozenness and condemnation into the clean, life-serving response of full volume expression of anger and love, i.e. "I'm really angry right now – my fists are shaking and my heart is beating really fast and I love you and I'm not sure you understand that! Do you hear me?"

Our world changes when we start to fully admit and communicate the depth to which we matter to one another, and to make room for the simple yet intense vulnerability of our human hearts.