



## WHEN ANGER RISES

Ways to claim anger's gift to ourselves and to the world

Alerted to the nuances of our anger, we can transform it into creative, benevolent action.

BY JANE GRISSMER

Sitting in an office meeting the other day, I was listening as a torrent of complaint and frustration broke loose: "The chairs are falling apart! The rooms need paint! The space is too cramped!" Funny, I thought, why hadn't this furor appeared three weeks before, at our daylong annual retreat? I looked out the window and saw that the day itself had gone from a quiet winter sun and blue sky to a 15-minute blizzard of sleet. Suddenly, the day and the complaints became one. Of course! The tempestuous stirrings of spring were beginning to course through our bodies and minds just as they were outside, in nature. The wind was beginning to blow.

I remembered the Taoist saying: "Spring comes and grass grows by itself." I have always loved that saying because it expresses sheer effortless growth of a kind that has always escaped me. Most often, like my office mates that day, I have bumped and shouted and exploded myself into a moment of newness.

Then I thought about the notion of emotion as a mov-

ing waveform, as taught in a class at Tai Sophia entitled "Engaging the Emotions." Like the waxing and waning of the moon, or the seasons rising and falling—like all phenomena of nature—waves of emotion start very small, then rise, climax, and taper off. Each wave has a beginning and an end, and how we ride these waves has everything to do with the environment we cultivate in our bodymind-spirit. I thought, what if I decide to relish this movement of anger as much as I had relished going into winter's stillness? What if I relish the moment when things are being stirred up, and simply let myself ride the wave of anger that spring brings to us?

Suddenly, I began to hear the complaints differently. Instead of obstacles I heard new growth. Instead of frustration I heard a call to our collective imagination and our ability to take action.

### Anger in the body/mind

Most of us like spring but don't like anger—the emotion of the spring phase of the

Chinese Creative Cycle. Yet in fact, it is not anger itself that is hurtful—though it may be uncomfortable. What damages is anger capped in mid-wave, so that it cannot move us into change and growth, but rather sticks and festers. What hurts is anger that blames and depresses, not releases and makes possible; an anger that only sees life in "shoulds," peering out from its narrow one-person perspective. The problem is anger that seeks revenge rather than justice, sameness rather than change.

Anger is about change. It challenges the course of our lives and pushes us into newness like so many babies coming through the birth canal. Indeed, a necessary pre-condition for anger is that we bump up against something. For plants, the obstacle is the earth as they push and prod their way through to the light. For us, it is whatever is binding us...our beliefs, our values, our habits, our past...the way we have always done things...our sense of being wronged by our family or our friends or the world. A sense

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of abuse can bind us internally (like my patient Ellie who said “I am holding myself too tight for new growth to happen”), or externally (like my daughter when she says “It was your fault I did it wrong, Mommy.”) We always feel the obstacle, the perceived wrong or abuse, as very personal. For many Americans, September 11 was a personal abuse.

A perceived wrong stems from expectation: that notion that “It isn’t supposed to happen this way.” I once had an auto accident when the driver in front of me (who worked for the Audubon Society) stopped dead on a thruway to avoid hitting a squirrel. And who paid? I did! I was not the requisite three car-lengths behind.

Balancing anger requires acceptance of the social contract that the lines have to be drawn somewhere. Finding and balancing those lines for the greater good is the work of jurisprudence. When boundaries are clear and agreed upon, people find themselves working forward on the same page together. When boundaries are con-

### Examine your creative cycle— do you have full use of your emotional energies?

Anger, the subject of this article, is associated in Chinese medicine with spring, a time of creativity and new growth. The Chinese see anger as a natural and necessary part of life; like blustery winds, it is just one more expression of the force and power of spring growth. Anger can create havoc, however, if it escapes the Creative (or Sheng) cycle, the ever-changing progression of life energy.

All living things participate in the Sheng cycle, which is easiest to see in the seasons, moving inexorably from winter to spring, then on to summer, harvest, autumn, and once again winter, when nature rests and prepares for the new growth of spring. In a human lifetime, the cycle shows up as infancy (winter, potential), youth (spring, upthrusting growth), maturity (summer, everything thriving and fruiting), harvest (a period of gathering and enjoying one’s fruits), and autumn (a time of letting go as life nears its end).

Acupuncture helps patients by balancing and enhancing these natural movements in the body, mind and spirit, so that each person has full use of all the energies—the wisdom of winter, the force of spring anger, the joy of summer, the nurturant harvest, and autumn’s ability to let go of what is no longer needed. The emotions associated with each seasonal energy are important to Chinese diagnosis, a skill that Jane Grissmer has been teaching for years. —EH

fused, individuals or nations eventually find that they expected different outcomes. Bump! Inevitably, conflict begins. Questions of what is just or reasonable often arise mid-bump. In our daily lives we experience this same moment when, after flying off the handle, we ask our friends, “Was it justified?” What we are really asking is, “What are the boundaries, and have I overstepped them?”

Anger is a necessity. To be smack up against the impossible (bump!) is a requirement for growth. It forces us to change. When my daughter is the “most impossible” I am aware that she is on the verge of breaking into a new developmental stage; and when I have reached the end of my rope with her, I am up against my own closed door, looking for a way through. We call these moments “growth experiences” after they have occurred; but while we are in them, they feel like the greatest of pain.

Anger craves challenge because therein lies its release. The most important skill in working with anger is not to put a cap on it—which

only makes things worse because it halts the wave. Rather, we need to meet anger head on and open it to creative exploration: "Is there any other way to look at the situation?"

I recall that as a beginning practitioner, I stepped with trepidation into the treatment room of those I sensed were angry. Years of experience later, when I understand anger as creativity unable to express itself, I find these moments to be the most thrilling. Bump! Life is about to birth something new!

Like every emotion, anger sits on a balance beam of yin and yang, light and dark, Doing and Being. Père Larre, French Jesuit priest and scholar of the Chinese medical classics, spoke it thusly, "Man must have marked within himself the characteristics of both square and round. Square is clarity, firm, form; round no form, circling."<sup>1</sup> Healthy anger sits midway on the beam, giving us access to both.

The yin, "round," Being aspect of the self broadens,



*Photo by David Bearnes*

opens and circles, causing us to wander, to dream; it softens contours and allows us to spread beyond our borders and edges to peer into something new. One of my friends used to love going down to the Potomac River, just to sit. He said that looking at the curves of nature instead of the straight lines of the city made him feel better.

The yang, "square," Doing aspect of the self narrows, aims and focuses; it forces a line and course, causing us to set sail, to go in a direction. It allows us to root, as well as to hold ourselves in tow. A patient spoke of this aspect as a personal struggle: "My greatest fear is that I will just wander away in dreams, that I won't

root down in something or find my ground to say no!"

Balancing the square and the round is the best of Chinese puzzles. If tipped too much to the yin side we wander aimlessly through life, lost in dreams and unable to call ourselves to task. This is the frustration of going nowhere. We can see this in the lives of addicts, in whom drugs push the Liver into depletion and into starry-eyed plans, masking what is painfully real on the inside—a lack of self-confidence and esteem. "Great Esteem" is the emblematic point on the Liver pathway for arousing a renewed and realistic sense of confidence.

If blown to the yang side, we tend to focus narrowly and

act precipitously, sure that we are right and that we are entitled. We are on the move, taking action; yet where we are going is small and narrow, conditioned by what we have known in the past, and lacking exploration or imagination. This we call "missing the forest for the trees." We can see this trend in the lives of extreme fundamentalists whose perspective on life has narrowed into a small passage.

If we see the world as only square or only round, then all we see is us versus them, this versus that. We may have an aim and a focus, but our actions may be too small—and we may be surprised when they create more harm than good. At the midpoint be-

## When challenged, we must ask ourselves: Do we stay stuck in these narrow ways, or do we go forward creatively?

tween the square and the round, yang and yin, we find creative expression. We feel our anger fully, then use it constructively, balancing freedom with rules, imagination with discipline. We act with force from an open mind. Every constructive act of creation occurs here, at the midpoint.

### Anger as a moving waveform

The wind is blowing, the wind is blowing! Tie it down! Batten the hatches! ... but if I tie it too hard I will surely break in two. If I don't tether it enough I will be blown to the four corners. Like riding a horse or raising a child, this is a question anger poses—when to rein in and when to let free?

If we begin to experience

anger as a waveform moving through us, we can sense our way into where our anger needs to move. The wave begins to swell in mid-February, arising out of our inherent impulse for creative self-expression. When the impulse is very weak, we may find that we are having trouble affirming a place for ourselves in the world: we may not feel entitled to express our opinions and needs, or even to know what they are. This pathological "lack of anger" (as it is called in the tradition of five-element acupuncture) becomes one of our challenges in life. People who suffer from lack of anger may find themselves living someone else's dream, not their own.

As the wave of anger continues to rise, we may feel a strong surge and say "Whoa!"

Rather than allow the wave to rise, we rein it in, cut it off before it gets to the top. Perhaps we were taught that anger isn't what nice people do, or we may assume that feeling anger is the same thing as letting it rip, doing or speaking what we will later regret.

Yesterday a client spoke about how her upbringing never allowed her to express anger. As a consequence, she has always pushed anger below the surface of her life, where it festered unresolved, ending up in fantasies of revenge. She had never learned to "ride the wave" to its crest and completion. Yet in the safety of the treatment room, when she allowed herself five minutes to express her anger, she very quickly rode over the top. In our work together, we discovered that she shuts

anger down instead of giving herself a chance to explore and release it.

Blame, resentment and revenge are anger's seedy cousins. When caught in their grip, our mind loses its freedom. We ruminate about the person who wronged us or the situation that left us speechless. My father lived his whole life with blame and resentment as a backdrop, so much so that they stole his creativity—they took over those moments when he could have been dreaming about possibilities. They thieved away the energy he needed for fruitful action.

If we get stuck at the top of the wave, frustration is a common experience. In this particular struggle, our anger has moved us to the moment of creation, yet we are stuck in

*Spectrum of the emotion of anger, from yin to yang*

Extreme YIN	Yin leavened with Yang	Equally Yin and Yang	Yang leavened with Yin	Extreme YANG
<p>Ilmp</p> <p>wandering aimlessly</p> <p>lack of anger</p> <p>permissive</p> <p>wide</p> <p>lack of entitlement</p>	<p>Imagination</p> <p>freedom</p> <p>uprooting</p>	<p>creative expression</p> <p>self esteem</p>	<p>discipline</p> <p>rules</p> <p>establishing roots</p>	<p>rigid</p> <p>excess anger</p> <p>judgmental</p> <p>narrow</p> <p>overly entitled</p>



Photo by David Beaves

the details of how to take effective action. The possibilities are great, yet we have trouble choosing a course. We experience the frustration of indecision and the resentment of opportunities lost. In these cases, understanding our plight and feeling our anger may be enough to help us move. One patient said, "I never knew I cared about it that much." When she came in the next week, she had decided what to do and had done it.

Finally, our anger can keep rising past its normal peak into rage, a rogue wave. Perhaps we carry a great sense of

entitlement that unconsciously overshadows others. Or we may be so tight in our bodymind that all we see are The Rules. In such a space, we leave little room for diversity, and we may find ourselves intolerant of others. I remember a patient who reported that throughout his life he had suffered pain in his big toe on the Liver pathway. (In Chinese medicine, the Liver is associated with the energy of spring/anger.) In conversation, I discovered that worse than the pain in his toe was the pain of all his opinions about others. As the pain of his opinions eased, so did the

pain in his toe.

When we ride the wave of anger to completion—let it rise, explore it, and use its energy for creative action—we bring the gift of ourselves to life.

#### **Beyond anger lies benevolence**

Beyond square and round arises benevolence, the virtue the Chinese associated with spring. Benevolence arises out of a broad view of life and all of its circumstances. It requires intelligence, knowledge, sensitivity and imagination. It is fostered by adventure and experience, and de-

pends upon one's ability to break out and find newness and challenge—not to keep wading in the same old stream.<sup>2</sup> Benevolence sees the world as One, not as Two. It sees Us Humans, not Me vs. Them. Benevolence knows that what is true lies between the lines; in acting, it strives to see the other's view while pointing to what is just for all. Gandhi and Martin Luther King used their outrage to move the world to a higher order. John Steinbeck, appalled by the living conditions of the "Okies" working on the railroad, wrote *Grapes of Wrath*. His imagination and

his discipline came together, fueled by his anger, to help create change in national labor policy.

How we negotiate our anger determines how and whether we can live harmoniously in a diverse and plural world. Since September 11, our nation finds itself in the midst of this challenge. We must ask ourselves, how will the actions fueled by our anger affect the world community? What is our highest vision for our nation and our world, and how do we move clearly in the direction of that vision? Benevolence sees conflict as an opportunity for *all* to win. It seeks the middle way through, ensuring a common victory.

This spring, I recall the words of Robert Kennedy, "Some see things as they are and say Why? I see things that never were and say Why Not?" This spring I look out to my country, my colleagues, my patients and my friends, and I shout, "Imagine!"

#### Notes

1. Claude Larre, Elisabeth Rochat de la Vallée. *The Secret Treatise of the Spiritual Orchid* (Cambridge, UK: Monkey Press, 1992), page 43.

2. In their book *Rooted in Spirit*, Claude Larre and Elisabeth Rochat de la Vallée discuss benevolence in the context of the Chinese medical classics (New York: Station Hill Press, 1992).

*Tai Sophia faculty member Jane Grissmer teaches "Engaging the Emotions," the course from which this article is derived, with faculty member Peter Marinakis.*



Photo by David Beares

## Suggestions for the Spring Season

- To help you look at life newly, to break a rigid thought pattern or open a tight box, change your physical patterns. Walk a circle in the opposite direction than you would normally, i.e., go to the left instead of the right. Or write with your left hand instead of your right. The change in physical direction will help you step out of the stream in which you feel stuck. It will stimulate a new center of your brain and open your mind to new possibilities.
- Too rarely do we give our minds a refreshing break from day-to-day tasks, allowing ourselves simply to enjoy our imagination. Sometimes, all we can imagine is the next item on the grocery list. Cultivate your imagination by walking in the woods. As you walk, release your mind—let it wander, absolutely free. Allow yourself to imagine beauty and possibilities beyond the frontiers of everyday routines.
- In the body, anger is stored in the contractile muscles, the ligaments and tendons. Sports that engage and move these muscles give us an excellent way to release pent up anger—running, for example, or sports that involve kicking (like soccer) or hitting (like tennis).
- Be intentional. Change can occur when we take new steps, however small, in an intended direction. Choose a new practice (perhaps one you think up on your "imagination walk"), then set a regular time for the practice and do it. After a period, look back and see what changed.
- Call on Oneness: When you feel anger, ask yourself if you have ever done anything like the offense that angered you. Have you ever sped up an exit lane, for example, instead of joining the line of cars? Often, you will find that the answer is yes. We are all One.
- To unleash your creative energy when you feel anger, imagine five different viewpoints and how each view would describe what happened.
- Allow your anger to teach you what you need. Ask yourself, "In what way am I hurt or balked by what has happened?" Then ask, "How else can I meet that need? What action is needed?" If you are angry on behalf of others, the same question will help: "What action is needed?" —J.G., E.H.