

# Men, Shame and Anger

By Rick Longinotti

Years ago there were TV commercials for Tareyton cigarettes where the smoker, whose eye was black and blue, asserted his loyalty to his cigarette brand, "I'd rather fight than switch". The tongue-in-cheek commercial played on a deep chord. In the cultural world in which I grew up, people admire someone who has "stood up for himself" rather than be humiliated, even if it comes to blows. It appears that self-respect is at stake, and this need for self-respect is so strong that people will suffer all kinds of painful consequences in order to achieve it. And herein is the tragedy. *Self-respect*, as the name implies, is granted by oneself. You don't need to follow anybody else's standards in order to get it. The idea that someone else can *make* you feel humiliated is a deception. As Eleanor Roosevelt put it, "No one can insult you---without your permission".

What do you do when someone has pushed your button and you feel hurt or angry? What Rosenberg teaches is that this is the time we badly need self-empathy. Empathy towards oneself is a listening to oneself to get past the inner approval/disapproval voices or angry blaming voices to locate one's own basic needs. Empathy outward looks at the other person's goal beneath their behavior---looking past what they say or do that pushes our button to find the universal human need they are attempting to fulfill. "Empathy in" and "empathy out" are intertwined like a vine with two trunks---they support each other. Sometimes we can't see things from the point of view of another until we get sufficient empathy for ourselves. And sometimes we can't get past our view of ourselves as a victim

of disrespect unless we turn our attention to what motivated the other person. For example, when I hear, "I hate you, Dad", I am likely to stay stuck in my own blaming reaction "She shouldn't say such a thing", or self-blame, "I am a lousy dad". But when I turn my attention to her motivation, I am liberated from my own perception as a victim of her insult---"What's going on for her? When I said 'no' to her going out tonight, did she feel humiliated--thinking I was treating her like a child? Or is she really disappointed, because she was wanting some excitement?"

Most times we get angry because of how we interpret another's action. Instead of seeing the action as deriving in the other person's attempt to meet some need, we interpret the action in how it affects us. We see it as directed at us---an insult, an injury, a sign that the other does not care about our needs. James Gilligan, a psychiatrist who has spent over thirty years working in penitentiaries, writes in *Preventing Violence*, of an insight that goes back to Aristotle that, "the cause of the desire to assault or injure others is the anger that is caused by feeling that they have been 'slighted' by them, and therefore feel justified in getting revenge for that slight". In agreement with this Marshall Rosenberg says, "All violence is the result of people tricking themselves into believing that their pain derives from other people and that consequently those people deserve to be punished".

"Wait a minute", I ask myself, "Isn't it true that people cause each other pain?" I think the answer, "Yes and no", is best thought of as a paradox---as in Buddhist thought. For it is predictable that when a parent neglects or abuses a small child, that child will suffer. At an early stage of child development, neglect

will cause the brain to atrophy, and even death can result. It is sadly true that abuse of a child causes the child to feel badly about him/herself. What Rosenberg is talking about---that how others treat us is not an inevitable cause of suffering to us---takes place in the realm of freedom. When we are free, we no longer have the reaction of feeling badly about ourselves when others “mistreat us” (i.e. treat us in a way that is designed to make us feel badly about ourselves). We might feel frustrated (that they make it harder for us to get our needs met), we might feel sad (that our needs are not met), but we won't feel badly about ourselves (shame).

No insult stings unless we believe a part of the message to be true---that it corroborates a negative view that we hold of ourselves. James Gilligan, in his work in prisons, discovered that “I kept getting the same answer when I asked one man after another why he had assaulted or even killed someone: ‘Because he disrespected me.’” From these experiences he concluded that, “the basic psychological motive, or cause, of violent behavior is the wish to ward off or eliminate the feeling of shame and humiliation---a feeling that can be intolerable”.

Now with the people that Gilligan works with, prisoners who have committed violence, it may take only a look in the eye to convince a person that the other has disrespected him. In warrior cultures where “survival...has required a readiness to fight in defense of one's honor,” Andrew Schmookler points out in *Out of Weakness*, “*The most trivial slight can become an occasion for the shedding of blood: the warrior exhibits a hypersensitivity to insult and a tendency to retaliate out of proportion to the offense.*” I found this to be true in the case of a young man I was counseling who

was trying to move out from his involvement with a gang. He could see that his actions were ruining his relationship with the mother of his son. But he couldn't find the freedom to respect himself in spite of what his homies thought of him. If he was called to go out to “watch their back”, he couldn't decline lest they think he was weak.

Sharon Ellison, in a book called *Taking the War Out of Our Words, The Art of Powerful Non-Defensive Communication*, reminds us that sensitivity to insult is not a monopoly of warrior types. “*When we react defensively, treating even a loved one as an adversary, we stop seeing the complexity of the other person's motivations. We aren't focused on the loved one's experiences or insecurities. Our focus, instead, is on construing the other person as **intentionally** motivated to hurt, manipulate, or control us. This allows us to slide easily into the dual belief that we are morally superior to our opponent in the conflict and that we are being victimized.*”

Of course, one might say, though we misinterpret some actions as hostile, what about those that are genuinely hostile, where the motivation *is* to hurt or retaliate? What Ellison is pointing out is that even those actions intended to hurt come from a wounded place in the other person. The other person believes that inflicting pain on another person will alleviate their pain. If the moment of hearing the insult we were able to think, “This person is in a great deal of pain and needs some understanding,” their arrow wouldn't strike home. For the insult is about the other person's distress, not our character. But if our inner critic agrees with their message, we have some work to do before we're immune from hurt.

## Righteous? Anger

We need to find another way to think about insult/injustice (in Latin, *inuria*, or injury, has both meanings)---a way that doesn't send us right to feeling shame. This is not to paper over the fact that someone may have acted in a way that prevents us from meeting our needs, be it physical assault, economic domination, imprisonment, etc. What we're changing here is how we think about that "harm". We no longer perceive it as detracting from our dignity. Our dignity is inviolate. Without this change in thinking, we are less capable of carrying out the social change necessary to alter the conditions of domination. For we are stuck in retaliation mode---in condemnation of the parties who dominate us.

Gilligan argues that if our response to injustice is anger, that is a sign that there is shame beneath. Gilligan: "The perception that one has been a victim of injustice elicits feelings of shame: over being valued so little by the other person, and for being too weak to make him treat one fairly". Since my habitual response to injustice (to myself or others) is anger, I decided to test Gilligan's hypothesis on myself. Is there shame beneath my angry reaction? First, with regard to an "injustice" towards myself: when the insult succeeds in stinging, I do find that I have those thoughts---"I am less than, I am not able to inspire fair treatment, etc."

But with injustice towards others, the shame is harder to find at first glance. For example, I think about our president, "How could he think that war would bring about a safer world? He is so wrong!" Alice Miller describes my attitude in *The Drama of the Gifted Child*, "{he} suffers because others are not as 'good' as he is." And how do I come

to suffer in this way? Because I was trained through shame. The desired behavior was elicited through granting approval (you can feel good about yourself) or disapproval (you should be ashamed of yourself). When I am angry with others for not seeing the harm that they do, I am applying the shaming attitude that was applied to me. It can be confirmed that my anger is bound with shame by noting the epithets that come to mind as I think of the target of my anger, "Stupid", "Phony", "Evil man", and so on.

To react in a way other than anger is to overcome the congealed shame of our social conditioning. Martin Luther King, Gandhi, and Jesus, among others, showed that there was another way to react to injustice. "Forgive them, they do not know what they do," is a statement which demonstrates unconditional acceptance rather than condemnation. It is that kind of acceptance that allows people to change. For they can stop building walls against feeling the pain of unworthiness, and begin to look at the effect of their actions on others. Those leaders of non-violence showed that it doesn't take "righteous anger" to motivate action to eliminate injustice, and in fact, "righteous anger" is an obstacle to social change.

## The process of transforming our anger and shame

First, we need to expose the negative internal messages that are triggered by the outward event, what we have habitually seen as an "insult". Our language has many words for use in these negative messages: "I am inferior, defective, unlovable, bad, worthless, stupid, incompetent, useless, unwanted, despicable..." Some characterizations more typically plague men, "weak; not man enough", while others

plague women, “ugly, impure, crazy”. We expose these messages as having their origin in our culture. We learned them, and the task of unlearning them is aided by seeing how they have afflicted others in our social group, e.g., women, men, minorities, etc. But it is not just as members of particular social groups that we have experienced this negative pedagogy. All of us have the experience of living in a society where for untold generations shaming was used as a way to get people to do things.

Aided by the consciousness of these negative messages, we can recognize their presence lurking behind the anger we feel when we’ve “been slighted”. We can focus on our need in that moment, our need for the antidote to shame---self-acceptance. The achievement of self-acceptance can be a life-long project for those of us who were schooled otherwise. The task is to practice feeling good about ourselves by

- surrounding ourselves with people who resonate with us in positive ways
- reminding ourselves of convictions that uphold our intrinsic value independent of anything we do or achieve
- through service to others (not that we need acts of service to give us permission to feel good about ourselves, but because of the inherent joy of giving)

It is a happy irony that empathizing with others is entwined with finding acceptance of ourselves. Trying to understand why the other party acts the way they do can help liberate us from “victim thinking”, the interpretation that we are disrespected, rejected, diminished, and so on. Empathizing with another, we heal the diminished view of ourselves that is present when we “feel insulted”.