Anger and Volcanic Energy

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Anger and I have a history. I have related to anger as a character defect, something wrong with me, for at least the last 20 years. But that’s not the truth. That’s just a conversation, something people say.

What if we said something different? What if anger is not only normal for all of us as humans, but useful as a source of power?

“DON’T TOUCH ME!!” That’s the last phrase a large, intimidating male working in a mostly-female workplace wants to hear, especially out loud in front of witnesses. In my reality, I had touched the shoulder of a nurse anesthetist as she turned to leave a conversation about inadequate patient care before it was clear that she could fix her error. In her story, I had struck her, severely injuring her shoulder and requiring that she be off work for months undergoing therapy.

The district attorney contemplated an assault charge. The Board of Medical Quality Assurance contemplated lifting my license. (I learned that BMQA investigators carry badges and guns, as if the power to take a license were not intimidating enough.) The hospital board contemplated suspension of privileges.

None of these punishments came to pass. Instead, I experienced my first anger management counseling in the upscale home of a woman who had previously run the hospital’s employee assistance program. Anger, she said, rises from fear – most commonly from fear of loss.

The workplace became less and less accepting of anger as I had experienced it. I was loud, I was foul-mouthed, and I looked intimidating. I was no better at home on our ranch, where displays of temper were common and bad language frequent. Though I never actually injured anyone, I broke my toe kicking a cow in anger during veterinary work, and I recall with shame brandishing a length of pipe at a teenager from the neighboring nudist colony when I caught him riding a dirt bike (fully clad) on our property.

I would have said that I was seldom directly angry at my first wife, but I learned after our divorce that she had had a different experience. I had been angry in her vicinity so frequently that she had felt virtually controlled by my anger.

I married again, this time a woman whose own anger was nearer the surface. She had little tolerance for any expression of anger from me. Overt anger, a stern-sounding voice, an upset expression, cursing – all were unacceptable. There were no mitigating circumstances. Anger around kids was even more reprehensible.

Over years, personal development courses and counseling have made a difference. I’m less and less volatile, less blaming, more aware that my world evolves from my own choices, more able to be with what’s so – and yet the goal of perpetual placidity and optimism continues to elude me.

Now in the midst of a second divorce, my men’s group said a few days ago that I seemed angry. I’d been denying that, generally saying that things are fine.

But they’re not fine. I’ve lost my second marriage, my relationship with my stepchildren, my access to easy retirement, and some freedom of choice about how much I need to work.

The woman with whom I spent a dozen committed years decided last summer that she didn’t want to be married any more. She said she’d like to end the marriage and be friends. The friendly divorce that we first anticipated disappeared into failed negotiation, failed mediation, and wholly baseless suspicions that I must somehow have squandered or hidden our assets.

We do have much less than we once had, but our money isn’t hidden. It’s gone. We consensually spent it, lost it as our equity-based retirement account fell to half, or lost it in the real estate decline as our new mortgage went under water. We’ll split what remains, with each of us a loser.

The children to whom I’d been stepfather for fifteen years seem to be pulling further and further away.

So I’m angry. So what? What if anger isn’t wrong, isn’t a failing, isn’t a character defect? What if anger is normal and natural, part of everyone’s emotional makeup?

What if we were able to treat anger as a form of power or energy?

If anger were volcanic energy, it might be instructive to look at the difference between Mount St. Helens and Hawaii’s Kilauea. In one, energy is held in until it’s too powerful to contain. Explosive release destroys the environment, rendering an area unlivable for years. In the other, energy is constantly released, explosions are unthreatening, and the resulting lava flow creates an expanding island.

What if we could channel anger into constructive action rather than explosive displays? What if we went running, or tore out a wall for reconstruction, or wrote a piece on anger, or focused on legal strategies that would end a stalemate? What if we let anger power life-improving actions instead of destructive explosions? What would it take to keep anger constructive, positive, and unthreatening all the time? Now that’s a worthwhile inquiry…

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