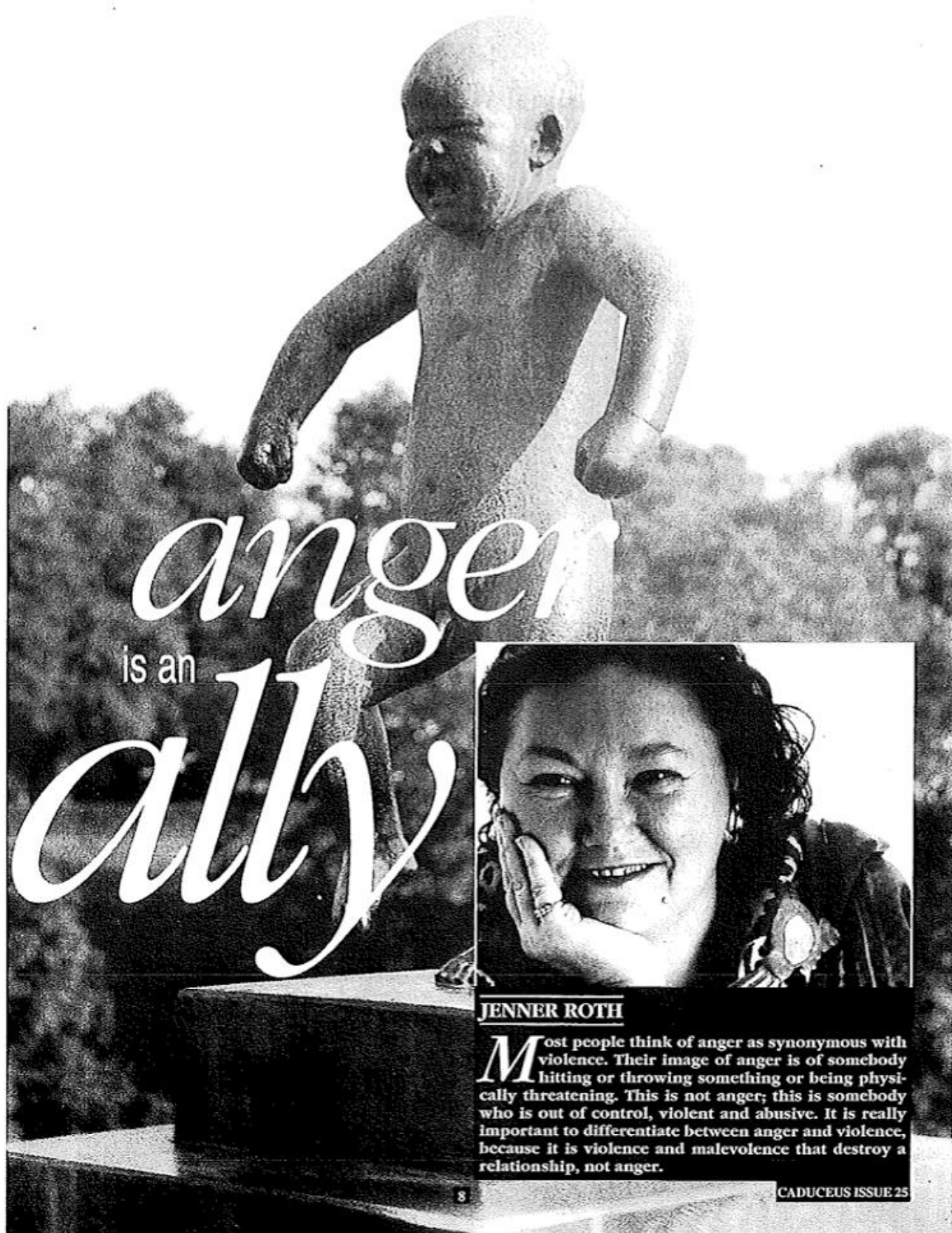


exploring anger in relationships



anger
is an
ally

JENNER ROTH

Most people think of anger as synonymous with violence. Their image of anger is of somebody hitting or throwing something or being physically threatening. This is not anger; this is somebody who is out of control, violent and abusive. It is really important to differentiate between anger and violence, because it is violence and malevolence that destroy a relationship, not anger.

Anger is not inherently bad. It is given to us at birth as a gift; it has a purpose and is essential to our health, well-being and survival; it is a danger signal telling us that we need to change or reorganize ourselves or the situation that we are in. When we feel a sense of irritation, of anger rising, it is letting us know that something is not right for us as an individual, as an organism. It works in the same way as pain: when we learn not to touch things that are hot because it hurts, the pain is telling us it is not good for the system. A baby has a less sophisticated sense of how to deal with that need: their irritation when they are hungry, or their crying when somebody is holding them wrongly or they are over-tired has a real purpose which is to say, 'pay attention, there is something that isn't working here'. This is as true for an adult as it is for a young baby.

We can develop a more sensitized and specific awareness of our anger and of the situation we are in. Adults in relationships generally have the power to change the situation, which of course they don't have as babies and young children. What often happens when adults are not aware of their power and responsibility in relationships is that they begin to feel as impotent as a young baby in terms of caring for themselves, achieving their needs and dealing with the situation, so that their anger becomes childlike. They are unable to control their anger and it becomes violent, abusive or inappropriate and at the same time they have the feeling that they can't control what is happening.

Listening to our anger

We need to realize that our anger is an ally and a friend; we need to learn to listen to it and to respect it in ourselves and in others. It is an internal feeling, an awareness which is different for each person and interesting to explore. How do I recognize my own anger? When do I feel myself being irritated? What are the symptoms for me? In my own personal experience I begin to feel heat in my belly and a kind of tension through the central tube of my intestines and stomach and then I feel heat rising up. I also feel a tightening and constricting of the muscles in my upper arms and I feel my whole torso rise up and lengthen. At its worst it feels as though it is a preparation for a volcano to erupt.

When I recognize that this is happening, it shows me that there is something not working for me, and it is a very important signal. It may be a personal issue, that somebody has said something that I don't like or isn't true about me, or it may be a social issue, where somebody is talking about a particular group, nation or sex in a way that I find offensive, or again it may be that somebody is manifesting some behaviour such as slapping a child or putting down their partner. It gives me important information, and without it I lose my sense of outrage, of ethics, of boundaries, my sense of my own belief in what is right and wrong. So we are also talking about how I discriminate, particularly in my relationships. I need to respect my anger and the message it carries for me.

Assumption of good will

What characterizes any relationship is the assumption that it is on-going, that we have chosen to be in it for a variety of reasons and that we will continue to be in it. It may be because I need a job, because you are my neighbour, because I really enjoy time with you, or because you are teaching me something, but the assumption is that we are going to continue to have this relationship and that there is something that is good in it for both parties, whether it is just a casual hello or whether this is the person that I most want to be with for the rest of my life.

Underlying this is a fundamental assumption of good will which is what makes the relationship work in a healthy on-going fashion.

If there isn't any good will, if the relationship is based on ill will, then there will always be a kind of felt anger, irritation and bitterness. It isn't working, it isn't good for me, so no matter what I do within that relationship I will always have this underlying current of anger, irritation and criticalness which will continue until I get out of the situation. There have certainly been points in any of our intimate relationships when we have taken a kind of pleasure in that ill will, feeding the anger, keeping saying to ourselves things like 'And then they did this ... and look at how they are behaving now ... and what can you expect?'

When we are engaged in that process we are denying our responsibility for our part in the relationship; we are denying the function of our anger and not respecting ourselves. But sometimes it can become a kind of addictive behaviour where we like the fact that we are in that position. Ultimately it becomes exhausting and debilitating, and that is what finally gets some people out of the situation, or makes them recognize that they are responsible for creating and maintaining it.

Honesty

In both my own experience and my practice I find that one thing that cements an on-going relationship is the ability for both people to be honest. This is an interesting word because for many people honesty assumes some kind of cruelty. When people say 'I want you to be honest with me' they generally mean 'I want you to tell me the worst possible things about me'.

Very few people are willing to hear the best possible things about themselves. Very few people believe that honesty means caring for another person, telling them when they come in how much you love them and appreciate them. So when I talk about honesty I am talking about the whole spectrum. It is about being honest about myself and being willing to hear you being honest about yourself. That means that I am going to let you know when something isn't working for me, and often the way I will know that is by feeling the sense of internal anger. My reason for telling you about it is not to tell you to change but to let you know that what is happening is not working for me. It is then my responsibility to negotiate with you and with myself to find out what it is that I need in this situation, what it is that I want and how that can be met.

There are very few people who will hold back emotionally in one area and not in other areas. Lying, withholding and keeping secrets is not specific, it tends to be general, so if I hold back my anger and my awareness of it, if I lie to myself or to you, then I also begin to hold back my affection and appreciation, because the anger that is there is always eating away at it. Then I begin to think things like 'I don't want to share, I don't want to tell you that. You wouldn't understand. I can't let you know this'.

Not one-up one-down

In relationships it is very important for both people to feel that they are not impotent, that it is not a one-up one-down situation. When young children are playing or doing anything they allow themselves a great deal of freedom to get angry with each other and to resolve it. They may flare up over a toy, with each one saying 'That's mine' 'No it's mine', or 'You knocked that over'



'No I didn't,' 'Yes you did' and then it reaches a point where both have expressed themselves and finished with it and they move on. You can see this very clearly with children up to the age of three or four. There is a sense of resolution which may take place immediately or over a few minutes where one of them goes off and tells somebody, a parent for instance, and then after a while they begin to miss the other and want to play together again.

So their anger has taken them away from each other, and they have talked about it, dealt with it and cleared it until it erupts the next time when again it is resolved. We have an innate ability to do this. What usually happens to Mary is that it doesn't offend her that I have been angry because she has taken my spade. Usually she agrees, she knows it is true but there isn't a sense of shame or guilt that surrounds it because there is also an understanding that the relationship that she has with me in the sandbox is going to go on, that my getting angry about it does not end the relationship. So it isn't some kind of awful disaster, a final episode in our relationship; it is part of the ongoingness, of what happens between the two of us. What we are looking at here is the fact that Mary and I have a relationship in which we handle each other's anger: we can hear it, we will listen to it, and we may or may not change our behaviour but the anger certainly doesn't end or undermine our relationship or alienate either of us from our sense of self.

As we grow into adults one thing that happens in our intimate relationships is that the social and familial injunctions that we have received as children from all kinds of places – you shouldn't be angry, you should keep your voice down and you shouldn't say that to your father or mother, best friend, teacher, whatever – affect our sense of what is appropriate for ourselves and our entitlement to a life, a situation and a relationship where we can be truly ourselves. So when we come to a relationship we begin to distort our reality, saying that we mustn't be angry because it isn't nice to be angry, and particularly it isn't nice for a woman – the words we have for angry women are very negative and patronizing, whilst the words that we have for angry men generally are exciting and adulatory.

Men's anger, women's anger

So as we grow older we begin to learn that to be acceptable in our culture, and probably to be acceptable to a partner in a heterosexual relationship, there are certain behaviours that we must take on. One is that the man is supposed to be angry and the woman isn't. As soon as that happens we have taken away the possibility of a peer relationship. I believe that a peer relationship is essential to a good relationship – I am not referring to two people who are the same but to two people who

have the same vested status in the world, with each other and their relationship.

If we don't have a peer relationship what usually evolves is a master-slave relationship where one person makes the decisions about what is right and wrong and the other person carries them out. It can go either way. The tendency socially is for the male to be the master and the female the slave. The more the woman in a heterosexual relationship becomes part of the image and possession of the man the more true this is, and the less acceptable are the woman's feelings, anger and strength.

Both men and women have to work with their anger to learn how to express it in a way that is non-blaming, non-critical, and safe. For men particularly that means learning to listen to their own anger before it explodes and understanding that exploding, shouting, hitting and beating are not expressions of anger but expressions of violence. So they have to learn a language to express it, to say things like 'I feel irritated about that. When that happens I feel tense and my mouth feels dry and I begin to feel uncomfortable. I wonder at what point that happens. What other ways are there that I can deal with this? Who can I talk to about it? Am I willing to accept that change is possible for me, that there are things which make me feel uncomfortable?'

For women the first thing is to acknowledge and accept that it is healthy and good to be angry, to listen to that anger and acknowledge to ourselves that we are angry, and to understand that that place is a friend. Then, as with men, to learn to put it into the world in a way which is neither manipulative, nagging nor critical – which are the ways that we have traditionally been taught are acceptable – so that as with men, we can begin to say, 'I realize I am feeling angry about this. For me it feels like nausea or tension, or, I stop hearing and at what point did I start recognizing this? How do I want to deal with it? What can I do about it that will ensure my safety, well-being and satisfaction?'

First line of defence

Adults have a way of using anger as a first line of defence, a way of covering things up. We will react to something somebody says to us that we don't want to hear by being angry and defensive. Young children do not react this way. If, for instance, you have a rule in your family, as most of us have, not to draw on the walls, and then a child begins to draw on the wall and you are angry with them for that, they will honour that anger by feeling bad about it and apologizing, but there is no sense of disorganization, chaos or fear in them around that anger. Something very different happens if they do something which is natural to them and is natural within the family. For instance, if it is normal in your family to have a bowl of fruit on the table from which people may help themselves and the child takes a piece of fruit out of the bowl and starts eating it, then suddenly you come in and tell them off for taking the apple, the young child will immediately burst into tears and feel very confused and won't be able to assimilate or make sense of your anger.

As adults we tend to lose that ability to understand when anger around us is appropriate. Because of a whole lifetime of being told that we are bad or stupid, we tend to feel that any kind of criticism that is directed towards us somehow means that we are bad. This happens in an intimate relationship when one partner says to the other, 'I've asked you a thousand times, it really irritates me when you squeeze the toothpaste in the middle', and the other partner gives a thousand reasons why they have to squeeze the tube in the middle, feels criticized, evokes their own anger to defend themselves and then starts saying, 'Well, I don't like the way you always leave the toilet seat up'. And then

*If I hold back my anger
then I also hold back
my affection and appreciation*

they are off on a crazy roller coaster ride where neither person has any ability to get out.

An alternative solution is 'Let's have two tubes of toothpaste' or 'I'm sorry, I've forgotten again, I know you said that'. But most of us don't have alternative responses available. Our first sense is panic and fear and getting angry in a reactive sense. Anybody who has been in that situation, as I guess everybody has at some time, realizes how it escalates and then how very difficult it is to get out of it. Often it escalates to such an extent that you can't even remember where it started, then people begin to say things to themselves like 'It isn't fair'. This 'It isn't fair' is not a statement of anger; it is the statement of a victim, a sense of defeat. If that becomes your view of a situation or of the world then there is nowhere to go with it; it is a self-fulfilling prophecy. It is a belief system that will begin to permeate everything in the relationship and what is going on in it.

Creating a container

How we learn to trust each other and express our anger in safe ways is very important. Expressing our anger without permission often feels very dangerous for others. If somebody started taking a bath without a bath tub you would be really concerned about the condition of your house! But most people feel that they can have anger without having any kind of container or boundary for it, or any sense that it is an appropriate time and place. Yet it floods and undermines our relationship in the same way that having baths without bathtubs would affect the structure of our house.

It is important to be able to say 'There is something I feel angry about and I really need to talk to you about it. Is there a time when we can do that?' I know this sounds wonderfully cool and collected in the heat of it, but it is a skill that we can teach ourselves. The result is that both people come prepared to talk together, feeling that each person has a right to feel angry about things, to express it and try to deal with it, and knowing that they are not going to be ambushed.

Knowing that you are not going to be ambushed suddenly takes away the fear of anger. It is knowing that somebody will not leap out at you and say, 'I'm really angry about what happened in church yesterday' just when you are about to sit down and watch television, or your parents are arriving for dinner.

We also need to accept the fact that anger exists. Particularly in relationships people try and develop a belief that there is no anger, and they ignore the fact of anger. Anger does exist, and whether it exists immediately in the relationship or outside, it is still part of the relationship because we bring outside anger home. If we have had a bad day – maybe somebody at work was angry at us, driving home the traffic was bad and another driver shouted at us – when we arrive home there is a welling-up of anger. If we come in and say 'I've had a lousy day and somebody got angry at me and I feel angry' then we are engaged in a dialogue. If we come in and say nothing, but the person we are living with says 'Hello, how are you?' and we say 'Why did you ask me that?' then our partner becomes the inappropriate target for our anger. When we suppress our anger, it builds up like a pressure cooker that we don't know how to depressurize. Our anger suddenly explodes all over our partner or our family and they don't know what is happening. Then they get angry back at us and we are into the escalation.

Neither enemy nor monster

People often describe a situation in which they have been angry in terms like, 'It isn't like me', or 'It just took over', or 'My anger was so great that there was nothing I could do'. These are all

ways of implying being out of control, being the slave of your anger, that your anger is some kind of beast or monster that appears out of nowhere and makes you do things that you don't want to do and wouldn't ordinarily do, and that it has nothing to do with you. As we get better at noticing and acknowledging that we are angry it becomes easier to deal with the situation. We can make whatever changes are needed or begin to express it in a way that may help bring about change. So the first thing is to recognize it as an ally and not as an enemy or a monster, and to understand that it has an essential place in our health and well-being. There would be no sense of social outrage at the terrible things that happen in the world without our anger.

In relationships where there is abuse the turning point usually comes when a person recognizes that this isn't appropriate behaviour. It is usually anger that will get them out of the situation, so it is exceptionally important that we pay attention to it. When we begin to do that, anger becomes a friend, a voice saying, 'Hey, just a minute, look at what is happening, check this out', rather than something that blindly wells up inside us. So the more quickly we listen to it the more it becomes our friend and our protector.

Just the fact that I am prepared to listen to the things that I am angry about means that I am also much more prepared to listen to them in my partner. So that when my partner tells me 'I am angry', my first response is not to stiffen up into a fighting posture, but to understand that this is their own personal issue and that I am not either responsible or to blame for their anger.

Nine times out of ten it isn't even about me but about something else that may have happened. When I am in that position of understanding, I am also able to listen and have a dialogue about it, so allowing the other person to have their anger in a safe and acceptable way. Anger becomes something that is woven in and out within the relationship, and has no more charge to it than saying 'I'm tired', or 'I'm hungry', basically, 'There is a need here. What can we do about it?' And this is part of who we are as alive people in an on-going relationship. There would be no sense of social outrage at the terrible things that happen in the world without our anger. ●

anger 'rituals'

There are many nice Anger 'rituals' which can be learned in Anger workshops and done on your own or with another as a way of learning more about your own patterns of anger and how you can best understand them. Talking with a friend or partner about your and their anger, the way you recognize it, how often it happens, what behaviour it has and what its function is for you is a very important way of learning to deal with anger. And then keeping these dialogues open and on-going so that they become part of your relationship.

A good ritual in relationships is to actually have a moan, maybe five minutes when everybody moans about what happened today. Everybody usually has something that went lousy so it is also a way to say, this happened, let's deal with it and put it out of the way, let's take the rubbish out and then we can get on with our relationships and with what is happening between us instead of carrying this rubbish bag around with us until it starts smelling and affecting everybody who is near it.

Jenner Roth is a founder-director of Spectrum, a centre for humanistic and integrative therapy. She is co-director, with Terry Cooper, of the Spectrum course in psychotherapy and the post-graduate course. She runs a private practice in London and is chair of the Spectrum Incest Intervention Project. For more information please see Resource Guide on page 30.