

Anger in the Christian Life

BY ROBERT C. ROBERTS

Anger expresses a sense of justice and a sense of being in the presence of responsible agents. A person who cannot get angry is seriously defective. But, as the Apostle Paul suggests, the problem with most of us is not that we are too slow to anger but that our anger tends to be sin and to spawn sin.

Molly and Mort have been married since Monday. For months they have planned a honeymoon tour of Kansas. On Tuesday they got as far as Indianapolis. They bedded down in a comfortable motel that served an early breakfast, and were set to make Topeka by night fall on Wednesday. Molly has heard so much about Topeka. She is sure this is going to be a perfectly wonderful beginning to a storybook honeymoon. But now Mort, returning to the room, has a sheepish look on his face.

“What’s up?” Molly asks. “Are we all ready to go?” “I’m awfully sorry,” says Mort. “For safe keeping I set the keys to the rental car just inside the trunk while I loaded it. And you know when I next remembered they were there? It was the split second before I heard that trunk lid snap shut as firm and final as my decision to marry my little Molly-melon.” To hide his embarrassment, interrupt the line of vision between their eyes, and protect himself from the emotion that he feels rising like a mighty tide in his sprightly bride, he approaches her for a kiss. (Mort, I might mention, is more mellow than Molly.)

Molly is in no mood for kisses, and becomes less so when they discover that the locksmith is not available until 4:00 p.m. The hope of Topeka by nightfall is dead. Molly is mad. Not to be able to get to Topeka tonight is

very bad. You could say she is frustrated: the circumstances are contrary to her wishes. You could also say she is disappointed: she was expecting something wonderful and now sees that it will not happen. But her emotion is more than irritation or disappointment. It is anger. In addition to seeing the circumstances as bad, she sees somebody as culpable.

Molly's anger is like a double spotlight: it shines on the evil that has befallen her, and it shines on the responsible and blameworthy originator of that evil, and his name is Mort. Mort appears as a bad agent, and not just a bad agent, but a responsibly bad agent—a blameworthy one. And to be blameworthy is to be worthy of punishment. In Molly's anger, Mort appears to deserve to be hurt. And this means that she would like to hurt him, or at least would enjoy seeing him hurt.

Now this sounds nasty, and many people resist such a description. They say, "When I am angry at somebody, I do not want to hurt him, nor would I enjoy seeing him hurt; I am just angry, that's all." My point is not that whenever you are angry, you want to devastate the offender, murder him or see him subjected to excruciating torture. Molly wishes nothing of the sort for Mort. But she does want him to suffer. She would like to detect in him a little more anguish about closing the trunk lid on those keys. And chances are she will say things to him that are intended to annoy him and make him squirm. You need not do physical harm to punish somebody. A dirty look, a slight snub, a little edge in the voice, the neglect of some little habit of kindness—these are actions characteristic of anger, and they function as punishment. Of course, really big-time anger may lead to mayhem and murder.

I noted that Molly is in no mood for smooching. This could be explained as another way of punishing Mort, but I think there is more to it than that. A person we are angry at appears unattractive. Even if the person is somebody we love—our spouse, our friend, our daughter, our father—he or she looks for the moment like an enemy. Anger tends to push love to the side and obscure it. An important part of love is seeing what is good in the beloved, appreciating him or her, taking pleasure in his company, finding her to be lovely, wonderful, clever, and sweet. But anger makes the other appear, for the moment, a bit repulsive, defective, and deformed—not the sort of person you would hug.

There is a gestalt drawing that nicely illustrates the relationship between love and anger. If you look at the drawing one way, you see an ugly old woman with a large nose and pursed lips. If you look at it in another way, you see a beautiful young woman with a little turned-up nose looking coyly away from you. This change is known as a gestalt switch: the perceived difference is a matter not of seeing different details but of seeing the whole thing ("gestalt") in a different way. There are two different whole pictures. The two views blot each other out: when you are seeing the ugly

woman, the beautiful one is invisible, and when you are seeing the beautiful one, the ugly woman is invisible.¹

If you are able to see the drawing both ways, then any time you are seeing the ugly woman you are on the verge of seeing the beautiful one. All you have to do is switch gestalts. But some people are more inclined to see the ugly lady, and others more inclined to see the pretty one. You might say their gestalt switching has different default modes.

Molly's default mode with respect to Mort is firmly set on love. Her wonderfulness-gestalt of him is on a hair-trigger switch. She may be angry for a while, but her heart is disposed in such a way that his good qualities are insistent in her mind. The gestalt of Mort's ugliness quickly fades. But for the moment Molly's anger eclipses her sense of Mort's goodness.

I need to mention another mark of Molly's mind: in her anger, she sits in judgment on Mort. It is as though she looks down from a moral height on his blameworthiness. So her anger involves not just a view of him but also a peripheral perception of herself in which she sees herself as someone who is in a moral position to judge. We can see that anger is judgmental in this particular way by considering what happens to an angry person when she reckons seriously with her own blameworthiness. If it occurs to Molly that on Monday it was she who laid \$100 on top of the cash machine in Wheeling and then drove twenty miles down the road before remembering what she had done, her anger at Mort is likely to dissolve in a vision of moral equality. Serious reckoning with her own faults brings her down off the judge's seat.

The story of Mort and Molly illustrates four features of anger. Anger involves casting blame on someone; wanting that person to be hurt; seeing the person as unattractive; and seeing oneself as in a position to judge. We now need to consider what is right and wrong about anger. If anger is ever to be right and fitting, two things must be true: first, that people are sometimes blameworthy, and their blameworthiness makes them unattractive and makes them deserve to be hurt; second, that somebody is in a position to judge. If this sounds harsh, remember that there are degrees of blameworthiness and degrees of anger: someone can be just a little bit unattractive, and for just a moment and in a particular context, and one can deserve to be hurt just a little bit. If anger is to be right and fitting, it needs not only to be in response to someone who is actually blameworthy and unattractive and who deserves to be hurt, but also to be limited to a degree of intensity that matches the case.



From first to last, the Bible affirms that anger is sometimes right and fitting. God's anger provides the clearest case of righteous anger. The prophets often report that God is angry and recount the hurtful things that

he has done or threatens to do to the people who now appear repugnant in God's sight.²

On several occasions Jesus displayed a similar anger:

Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand. They watched him to see whether he would cure him on the sabbath, so that they might accuse him. And he said to the man who had the withered hand, "Come forward." Then he said to them, "Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?" But they were silent. He looked around at them with anger; he was grieved at their hardness of heart and said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was restored. The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.

Mark 3:1-6

Jesus is angry with those in the synagogue because of their flagrant disregard for what God cares about (the wellbeing of the man with a withered hand), their hyper-concern with less important matters, and their willingness to "work" on the sabbath themselves in the nasty business of pursuing Jesus' death. Jesus' anger is fully appropriate: the synagogue attenders are deeply blameworthy; they deserve to be hurt; and they are morally repulsive to anyone with eyes to see. Furthermore, Jesus is in a moral position to make the "judgment" that his anger expresses. Jesus is pictured as angry in other passages as well, but he is never pictured as angry about the kind of minor offenses and frustrations that anger most of us.³

The Bible proclaims not only that God is often angry, but also that God is perfect love. Indeed, his anger is based in his love. And it is because Jesus loves the man with the withered hand, and because he loves God and his kingdom, that Jesus is angry at those who would obstruct compassion and plot against his life. But Jesus also loves the plotters; he is strongly disposed to see the beauty and wonderfulness in these creatures of God. The switch on his love-gestalt has a hair trigger, so that with the first sign of true repentance his eye for their goodness will overwhelm his eye for their sin.

Because God can be angry, we know that anger can be right and fitting. But is the anger of ordinary human beings ever right and fitting? The biblical answer is that even though our anger is not necessarily sinful, sin is a constant danger where anger is concerned. Sin always lurks in the vicinity. The classic text is Paul's: "Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil" (Ephesians 4:26-27). What on earth is human anger good for?

Biologists point out that anger is very useful as a signal to the offender. The anger of our fellows is like the sting of a hot pan: it is intended by our creator to elicit corrective action. Molly's anger tells Mort that he has done something offensive, and this is information he needs if he is to adjust his behavior in the future. A husband and wife who never show any anger are either perfect, which is unlikely, or they are not spontaneously communicating some of the things that are important to them.

Anger is a natural consequence of morally well-formed concerns. Consider a person who is completely disinclined to get angry. Nothing you can do will anger him. He is walking down the street with his old mother, and a couple of neighborhood knuckleheads walk up calmly, push her into the street, and spit on her. She is rattled and weeping, and he says, "Aw, Mom, I'm sorry that happened, but quit complaining; that sort of thing happens all the time in this neighborhood." The son's failure to get angry at the knuckleheads probably signals a defect in his character. Maybe he does not care enough whether his mother gets humiliated; or maybe he is so cowardly that he would rather condone the knuckleheads than arouse their wrath by condemning them; or maybe he does not have enough sense of his own dignity, and his mother's. Or maybe he does not have enough respect for the knuckleheads. He thinks: these are not responsible persons; they are just part of the neighborhood blight.

Anger expresses a sense of justice and a sense of being in the presence of responsible agents. In sinful human beings the sense of justice is often distorted, as in the case of a person who becomes livid when someone cuts in front of him in line; but people ought to have a sense of justice, and to have one is to be prone to anger.

So anger has some happy aspects: it is, ideally, a natural signal that somebody's behavior needs to be adjusted; it can be a sign of proper moral concerns and of a proper perception of moral truths. A person who cannot get angry is seriously defective. But, as the Apostle's comment suggests, the problem with most of us is not that we are too slow to anger but that our anger tends to be sin and to spawn sin.

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Molly's anger at Mort is to their marriage as salt is to a good meal: it's good, but a little goes a long way. If, instead of lightly salting your food, you sit down to a hearty bowl of salt tablets and wash them down with a couple of glasses of seawater, first you gag and then you die. The same thing happens to a marriage – or any other relationship – that overdoses on anger. The reasons for this should be clear. In the moment that Molly is mad, Mort's good qualities fade into the shadow, and she sees a repugnant and unlovely person whom she wishes to see hurt. Love, by contrast, is a perception of the goodness of Mort, whom she wishes to see happy. The relationship can stand moments of anger if they are followed by forgiveness – feelings and expressions of love.

Molly is in a good position, because her love-gestalt switch is on a hair trigger where Mort is concerned. This is natural during the honeymoon. But it may come less naturally and take more effort afterwards, as Mort continues to be a little on the irresponsible side, and then is too mellow for her taste when she protests. The trigger on the love-gestalt switch may begin to rust a little, so she must force it, and oil it now and then with special kindnesses. The danger of letting the sun go down on your anger, again, and again, is that the switch will get so stiff that anger becomes the default mode: what you are most inclined to see in the other is her blameworthiness, her unattractiveness, and that she deserves to be hurt. The social dynamics of anger give the devil even more room for play than I have indicated so far. Perhaps our gestalt switches naturally find a default mode where they are most often set, but anger and love almost always have a context of personal interaction that encourages and tends to perpetuate the one setting or the other. Were Mort less mellow, he might respond to Molly's anger by getting angry himself and calling her childish or judgmental or coming up with something even more irrelevant and hurtful to say, like, "The whole idea of taking a honeymoon in Topeka is the stupidest thing I ever heard of. If I had married Helen Wessel I would be headed for Paris right now." To put it mildly, this does not help Molly get over her anger and get on with her love. So she may take an equally creative snip at Mort's emotional jugular, and the two of them spiral downwards into that enmity and bitterness that the devil so adores. Temporarily, both of their gestalt switches are locked in the hate position. If this becomes an unbroken pattern with them, love will die.

The enmity between human beings that unchecked anger promotes is not the only way anger gives the devil working room. We saw earlier that when a person is angry, she sees herself as in a position to look down in judgment on the one she is angry at. And we saw that when Molly is able to think of some offense of her own that is on a par with Mort's and to hold the two offenses in her mind, her anger is undercut. This judgmental aspect of anger means that if anger is practiced wholeheartedly and habitually, it can

lead to a very distorted sense of one's status vis-à-vis other sinners and vis-à-vis God. It can seem to a person that he or she is really quite a bit better than other sinners and has a special moral alliance with God.

Molly's position of being just as blameworthy in her own way as Mort is in his is the position we are all in, according to God. Before God we all have such a blotchy moral record that we are hardly in a position to judge one another. Anger, especially if indulged in steadfastly, makes us into judges in a way that only God can be a judge. Remembering our own sin, and remembering that God alone is God, is a powerful resource for diffusing our anger and strengthening our love.

But now our thinking seems to have gotten us into a conceptual fix. If seeing oneself as in a position to judge the offender is a part of anger, and if we are never in a position to judge one another, how can human anger ever be permissible? Instead of saying, "Be angry, but do not sin," shouldn't Paul have said, "Never be angry, because 'Judgment is mine,' says the Lord"?

We must admit that the condemnation ingredient in anger always involves an illusory self-perception. But sometimes illusions are an inevitable part of our human situation and ones that we get around not by eradicating them but by compensating for them. The sun will always look to us as though it goes down in the west, though we know that the earth is just rotating in such a way that the sun is becoming hidden to our part of the earth. We need not be deceived or make any false inferences from sunsets as long as we keep our larger knowledge of the solar system in mind. If we never saw the sun as setting, something important would be lost from our lives.

In a similar way, it is useful and fitting, besides being unavoidable, for Christians to get angry from time to time. Recall the man whose mother was knocked into the street, who should rightly be outraged on her behalf as well as his own. And Molly, when confronted

by Mort's delinquencies, need not always excuse them in light of her own failures. Sometimes she can see them in the more local and simple terms of Mort's responsible agency, his moral unattractiveness and his deserving to be hurt. It is true, after all, that Mort, and not she, performed *this* offense. But in the back of her mind should always be the catalog of her own offenses, forgiven by God, which she can bring into connection with Mort's. By being

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ever ready to add this information to her construal of the situation, she will be able to keep anger in its proper place so that it enhances, rather than erodes, her love.



The Apostle Paul often lists things that are contrary to the Holy Spirit and the new life of the Christian. In a couple of these lists he mentions “anger and wrath” as belonging to the old self and needing to be “stripped off.” In their place we are to clothe ourselves with such things as love and peace (see Colossians 3:5-17 and Ephesians 4:31). Since the Apostle allows that proper anger in small quantities can be good, perhaps he is speaking here not of all *instances* of anger but rather of the *vice* of irascibility – of being an angry sort of person. Molly’s anger at Mort is just an episode of anger and does not by itself indicate a general irascibility.

What would Molly be like if she became an *angry person*? Let us imagine Molly after twenty years of indulging anger. As Molly’s children say, “Mom gets mad about *everything!*” Jeff is sixteen now, and when he cooks lunch for himself he sometimes doesn’t clean up the kitchen. This infuriates Molly. But the really infuriating things, like the way politicians play political games with the well-being of poor people’s children or the way the rector speaks out of both sides of his mouth to members of the congregation, do not upset Molly at all. She gets mad only about things that affect her directly, and in those cases she is quite indiscriminate.

When Mort is late getting home from work and doesn’t call, Molly exaggerates the offense, looking for the ways it was truly heinous and underhanded and irresponsible and despicable. She just hates it when Mort has solid excuses for his delinquencies, and does her best to refute them. She likes to think of him, and all the people who offend her, as deeply culpable and completely inexcusable. Their good qualities become invisible to her. When she gets really mad, she would like to destroy people, or make them suffer agonies. She enjoys picturing her offenders as shriveled in humiliation for their offenses against her. If somebody points out that she too has failings, some of which are pretty similar to Mort’s and the kids’, she doesn’t want to see the point and in fact doesn’t see it. When Mort and Molly get into one of those spiraling exchanges of angry responses, Molly never takes the initiative to stop the cycle, but just plows ahead until either a relational disaster occurs or Mort takes responsibility by injecting an element of humanity.

Few things are uglier than a thoroughly irascible person, and it is clear why very early in the history of the Church anger came to be regarded as one of the seven deadly vices. When it gets deep and pervasive in a life it really does kill love and everything lovely. What a miserable life this Molly has, and how she spreads suffering wherever she goes!



But, since Molly is a fiction of my imagination, I can jolly well imagine her any way I like. And so I say that Molly and Mort have a future very different from the one I just sketched. The nightmare of the irascible Molly is only a warning. The real Molly has borne, with her Mort, fruit of the Holy Spirit. The real Molly does get angry, of course. Sometimes her anger is justified and sometimes it isn't. But Molly has the habit of monitoring her anger and bringing it into submission to God and to her love of those around her. When she finds herself spiraling downward into the bitterness of an angry exchange, she takes the initiative of saying a kind word, telling a joke on herself, offering a compromise, or making a gesture of reconciliation. And the funny thing she has found is that taking the initiative in an intelligent way hasn't meant that others treat her like a doormat. On the contrary, over the years Mort and the kids have responded by following her lead so that they often take the initiative, early in the process, to stop the nasty spiraling.

One thing Molly asks, when monitoring her anger, is whether she is exaggerating the offense. If she finds herself "demonizing" the offender, she takes herself in hand and says, "Let's see if we can find extenuating factors. Were the kids tired when they became so whiny? Had I done something earlier that provoked Mort into that unkind word?" Sometimes her spirit resists hearing

excuses on behalf of the offender, but she finds that if she presses herself just a little to search them out and hear them, they are really not so humiliating to acknowledge, and it is an exhilarating experience to see love emerging from the storm, the devil cramped in the strait-jacket of the Holy Spirit.

The result of these disciplines, over time, is that Molly never feels so angry

that she wants to devastate the offender. Even in the midst of anger, she remains quite open to perceiving his or her good qualities; the default mode of her gestalt switch has become more and more prone to the love position. And she seldom gets angry at all about merely trivial offenses against her own person; the anger she does feel is much more often occasioned by real cases of significant injustice.⁴

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NOTES

1 For a brief history of this nineteenth-century illusion drawing, see “Young Girl and Old Woman Optical Illusion,” (August 14, 2011), www.opticalillusioncollection.com/2011/08/young-girl-and-old-woman-optical.html (accessed July 11, 2014). Many contemporary variations are available on the Internet.

2 For more on God’s anger, see Michael C. McCarthy, S.J., “Divine Wrath and Human Anger” *Anger*, Christian Reflection: A Series in Faith and Ethics, 53 (Waco, TX: Baylor University, 2014), 37-45.

3 For an exploration of Jesus’ expressions of anger, see Stephen Voorwinde, “Jesus and Anger: Does He Practice What He Preaches?” *Anger*, Christian Reflection: A Series in Faith and Ethics, 53 (Waco, TX: Baylor University, 2014), 30-36.

4 This article is based on my “Tempering the Spirit of Wrath: Anger and the Christian Life,” *The Christian Century* (June 18-25, 1997), 588-592.



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