



Writings of W. Burney Overton

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Mad At God – Or Somebody

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My friend was certainly believable when he burst out, "I'm mad as hell at God." Not only his tone of voice, but also his face and body declared his statement to be true. I had listened to him enough on a number of occasions to have some idea of what might be going on with him. He had reason to feel angry with something or somebody, and God was a likely point of focus.

"What are you going to do about it?" I asked. For a minute, I thought he was going to hit me, and, if he had, I would have understood why. After all, my response to him didn't seem to be very supportive.

But it was intended to be – and helpful, too – and he knew it.

His face reflected his first momentary reaction, and then he settled back into his seat and indicated that he was ready to talk about it. It turned out to be quite a discussion. Anger is a legitimate emotion. It rises out of feelings of helplessness when things are happening over which one has no control, and which either threaten or cause some kind of harm. Or, things aren't the way they are supposed to be and it doesn't seem to be possible to make them that way. An almost universal situation is one in which there is a loss of something or somebody significant, and there isn't anything to do about it but deal with the loss in some way – and, of course, all the feelings that go with it.

When there is such loss, and when one feels out of control, the feeling named anger rises with varying degrees of intensity. In its most intense form, it is an urge to kill, or, at least, to be destructive in some way.

The trouble is that destructive expression of anger usually is more hurtful to the person expressing the anger than to the person against whom it is expressed. Is there, then, a positive, constructive way to express anger, or must it always be destructive? Maybe a way not to feel angry in the first place is what is needed.

However, since feeling angry is a legitimate feeling, it wouldn't seem helpful to try to find a way not to feel angry. That might mean to try to deny it, or bury it, or turn it inward, and that also would be destructive.

I note, though, that, if I address the situation in which I feel helpless and deal with the feelings of helplessness, I tend not to continue to feel angry.

But what about constructive expression of angry feelings?

That question addresses the real issue – How do I express my angry feelings? I have a number of options, some of which are destructive and some of which are not. I make the choice.

Anger can be expressed angrily. This is destructive. It can also be displaced on something or somebody not the source of the anger, or it can be turned in on one's self. These also are destructive.

They seem normal and typical. After all, when I feel angry, I feel the urge to lash out – to attack – to make somebody pay. I want to shout and scream and swear. I want to throw things. I want to make things be the way I want them to be. My temper is up. My face is flushed. The adrenalin pumps. I urgently want to do something – and I do unless I am too afraid to take the risks.

When I am angry, I have very little desire to try to be constructive. It is only after the anger has spent itself, or when I feel calm and in control again that I am willing to consider the possibility that there may be positive ways to deal with the anger and with the situation that triggered the angry feelings.

In my more rational moments, I confront my desire for better ways to give expression to my anger. I ask myself, "Why do you express your anger angrily?" and I'm not sure of the answer to that question.

Maybe acting out angrily is a way to drive myself to do or say something that seems too risky in calmer moments. Maybe I need the anger to impel or push me to cope in some way with an unacceptable situation. Maybe I use it to tap energy sources that I have denied. Maybe I call on it to make me assertive – to allow me to see myself as powerful and dominant. Maybe it allows me to excuse my doing something I wouldn't do when not angry. Maybe it serves a useful purpose for me.

In fact, my anger may serve to let me preserve my picture of myself as a victim, or to escape from responsibility that is rightfully mine. If I don't like myself very well, or if I think I do not have the strength or ability to cope with the situations of my life – but I think I am supposed to be able to – being angry can serve beautifully to let me escape.

"You hit me." "You took my candy away from me." "You wrecked my car." "You hurt my feelings." "You left me." "You abused me." "You called me names." "You ---" On and on it can go. Always "You" – somebody – life – did something to me – deprived me – didn't do as I wanted – and I am angry. It isn't my fault. I don't have any responsibility. You did it to me. I am the victim. I have a right to be angry. Nobody can blame me for being angry – or for what I do in reaction.

It is important to be able to separate legitimate feelings of anger in response to a situation from the procedure of holding on to anger for whatever reason. Typically, people hold on to anger to avoid picking up appropriate responsibility, or to preserve an image of themselves as victim, or to feel justified in condemning or lashing out at another person. None of these procedures seem to work very well. The anger remains and continues to do its destructive work in the angry person.

"You mean I don't have to hold on to my anger," I am asked. "You mean I don't have to keep on being destructive with my anger?" That is, indeed, what I mean.

Jesus said, in the Sermon on the Mount, "But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you," (Mt. 5: 44). The words in the Sermon on the Plain are a little different. "But I say to you that hear, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you." (Lk. 6: 27-28)

Paul is also quite explicit when he writes, "Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God; for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.' No, if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him drink, for by so doing you will heap coals of fire upon his head. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." (Ro. 12:19-21)

It appears that the ideal way to cope positively with angry feelings is to put Love in the place of anger. Let Love be the energy source – the drive – the motivation.

I can hear the anguished cries, "How can I do that?"

"Do you mean," you will say, "that I can just give up my angry feelings – that I can see things differently – that I can have another interpretation – that I can change my attitudes."

Of course you can, but it may not be at all easy. To illustrate, let's look at the scriptures I have quoted, especially the one from Romans, "for by so doing you will heap burning coals upon his head." On the face of it – given fairly typical points of view – the motive for Loving, or for treating the enemy kindly, seems to be to get revenge. "I can make him pay if I treat him good."

The passage can be seen differently. I can have another interpretation. I can change my attitude. For instance, I can allow myself to see that both Jesus and Paul are suggesting that constructive coping with anger – or the enemy – is to be aware of his need, or hunger, or pain, or suffering, or misguided outlook on life, and to minister to him with Love. I can look at the situation and try to see it from his point of view as well as my own. I can interpret what he says or does in a different way. I can try to be in touch with his fear, or uncertainty, or defensiveness, and can begin to understand something of what drives him to say or do the things he does. When I do, my own attitude tends to change in a constructive way. I tend to recognize his responsibility, and not to take it away from him by being angrily involved with him. I don't give him any excuses.

Such a change of view and attitude and behavior on my part, does tend to "heap burning coals upon his head" – not because I have willed that harm to come to him, but because I have left responsibility for his behavior with him and he must deal with the consequence of it himself. He has no excuses. Loving and ministering to another according to his need, and apart from his behavior, is, I suggest, the most constructive way there is to deal with your own anger.

But if, in your anger, you are determined that he shall pay in some way for what he has done to you, none of what I have suggested is helpful. Your belief system says, "When somebody hurts me, that person has to pay, and it is my right to see that he does."

Certainly, you can hold that position if you choose to. You can pay the price involved.

The alternative is not just to give in, nor to knuckle under, nor to act as if it doesn't make any difference. And certainly it is not to pretend as if the anger is not there. What, then, is the viable alternative?

I must first deal with the issue of what I believe, and, therefore, what my outlook on life is. If I am willing to believe that anger can be replaced with Love, I can then explore the difference it would make in my view of the situation and in my reactions to it. If I am willing to abandon the notion that I am a victim, I can get on with taking responsible charge of my own life and my own behavior.

Given that I have chosen to take the first step, I can proceed with the second. I can set the anger aside for the moment, and go back to my feelings of helplessness out of which the anger arises. I may even be helpless – except in the area of attitude. I am never helpless in that area.

The third step is to review the situation in which I feel helpless, and to raise questions about how I am seeing the situation – what is in it for me to see it that way – and what my own contributions to the situation may have been. This is a difficult step. It is in this step that I take full responsibility for myself, no matter what the other has done. I don't look for any excuses. Neither do I excuse the other person from responsibility. I just don't turn it all over to the other person. In other words, I stop seeing myself as victim.

I recognize, of course, that I may, indeed, have been victimized in some sense and to some degree. There is a difference between recognizing that I have been victimized, and taking on the role of the victim. If I don't want the role of victim, then I take the role of the person responsible for him/herself. Taking that role enables me to confront the realities of my own contribution without setting aside that of the other.

I can now take the fourth step, which is to examine my alternatives, and to consider the cost of each of them. My alternatives – not those of someone else. I don't mean to disregard or ignore what the other could do, but I do mean to deal with my own options and their costs. A part of this step is to recognize where the various responsibilities lie, and to claim one's own – but not claim nor accept that of the other. This may be a fine balance with some overlap, but it is so important.

The fifth step is the one in which I make my decisions. In the light of all my considerations, what do I really want to do – and what am I willing to do, given the possible costs.

The sixth step is implementation – what I do to carry out my decisions. Here, it seems to me, being clear and consistent is essential – clear with myself as well as with others involved, and consistent in the eyes of the others as well as in my own eyes. If I

am not consistent, I haven't really made considered decisions, and I am functioning from a hidden agenda. Namely, that I want something other than what I have said or decided.

There is a seventh step. It has to do with my being at peace with myself with the decisions I have made and the actions I have taken. It involves my putting the anger away so that it is no longer a priority force in my life. Whenever I think about the situation to which I reacted angrily, I may well feel the anger again, but, if I have done my homework and mean it, I can acknowledge the feeling and put it where it belongs.

A common situation that generates anger in this day is that of the broken marriage. It is one of the most blatant experiences of loss that people have. Because both parties may still be around, it is extremely difficult simply to acknowledge the loss and get on with life.

There are at least three reasons to be angry with an ex-spouse: because he/she left, because he/she functioned in such a way that I had to leave, because of what he/she has or hasn't done since the divorce. One, or all, of these may be involved.

Allow me to try to make the application without such careful attention to the use of pronouns. I am the angry one, and she is the ex. Of course, she is angry, too, but it gets too complicated to try to make the application both ways.

So I am angry. Not only did she leave, but, before she finally left, she functioned so badly that I thought I was going to have to leave. And since the divorce, she has been just impossible. She won't listen to reason. She makes demands that I can't possibly meet. She does and says things that keep me in an uproar. She certainly isn't getting over her anger, and I am having to pay the price for it. Little wonder that I stay angry, and that I can't even settle my anger over what has already happened. I even wonder how I could ever have loved her.

I do feel helpless. It is a familiar feeling. For years I have felt it. When I try to look at my contribution to the situation, my reaction to her gets in the way. I am tempted to excuse myself. I am justified to feel the way I do, and to have done what I have done. No one could expect me not to be angry. But I really want to confront my own part in the matter. I don't want to blame myself, nor her, but I do want to be clear about what I contributed. I was too busy with my work, and too concerned about "doing my thing". Sometimes I was pretty "macho" and unwilling to do "women's work". I expected her to see to my every comfort, and got pretty upset when she didn't. I often didn't listen to her when she tried to tell me things of concern to her. I had other things to do – more important things.

I've written enough to illustrate. I need to take an inventory, and check on my attitudes, my interpretations, and my actions. I need to be scrupulously honest with myself. I need to accept fully my part in what has happened between us, and I need to be very clear about what my responsibility was and is.

As I do my homework, I can move on to deciding just what my attitudes are going to be, and what I am, and am not, going to do.

Doing my homework like this has a curious effect on me. I no longer feel helpless, and, even more oddly, I discover that I don't have the intense negative feelings toward her that have almost dominated my life since we separated. When I confront my feelings of helplessness, make decisions about my alternatives, and act on those decisions, my whole outlook changes for the better. Then I discover that I really am getting on with my life.

And I discover, also, that I no longer feel the intense anger – not at God – not at anybody.