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THE SHAMEFUL SHOCK WAVES OF RAGE

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One of my deepest personal regrets is that I raged at my children and at my wife in the early days of our family life. I didn't fly into a rage every day or every week or even every month. But I would store up a gunny-sack full of hurts, and when I couldn't take it anymore I would scream, holler and pound on the table. Basically, I would try to scare everybody into doing what I wanted them to do. This was clearly sick behavior, and to some extent I knew it. But when a fit of fury came on, I couldn't stop myself.

Once I had finished a rage, I felt terrible about it and wanted to be close to my family again. I couldn't understand why they wouldn't forgive me. In fact, my rage had so traumatized them that they simply couldn't trust me anymore. One fit is all it takes to murder trust. Today I believe that it is never useful or appropriate for me to raise my voice or to shout at another human being. It's bound to hamper any possibility I might have of intimacy with another. Part of the great damage of rage is that the rage addict - because that is what I was - always feels terrible after an outburst and tries to make up for the hurt that's been done by abruptly becoming the nicest person in the world. This Jekyll-and-Hyde presentation frightens family members, who can't be sure who's really in there, and who's liable to come out suddenly, without a moment's notice.

About ten years ago I started to do serious work on my problem in a recovery group. I found out that I had never learned any appropriate ways to express my anger. When I was child, I was told that anger was a mortal sin. I still remember how I trembled when a nun showed our class of grade-school children some lifelike colored drawings of people burning in a field of flame. She told us that these were actual pictures of hell. She wanted us to know where we were going to end up if we committed a mortal sin.

When I expressed anger as a child in my family, I was abandoned. Love was literally removed from me. So in my unconscious, anger came to be associated with abandonment and went underground. And because I had buried my anger, rage formed as a kind of volcano under that - unseen but ominous, bound to blow sooner or later.

When I started working on rage, I learned that whenever I got near my angry feeling, I felt ashamed. Yet anger is a healthy human emotion. And like all emotions, it protects us. Our anger gives us strength when our needs have been violated. It is one of our basic instincts.

Because I hadn't allowed myself to have my anger, I had become a people-pleaser. In the very beginning I learned to be a nice boy; later I wanted to be a nice daddy. But I'd let my children misbehave for weeks without a word from me, then explode with fury. Today when I begin to feel angry, I withdraw to be by myself and think about my feelings. I ask myself what I saw and heard that incited my anger. I examine my interpretations of the events that created that feeling of anger. And I ponder what it is that I want from the person involved.

Let's say that at a party you see your husband enjoying the company of a very attractive young woman. You feel angry. On reflection, you realize that you want his reassurance that he loves you. You might say to him later, "I got angry when I saw you talking to so-and-so last night at the party. It made me jealous. I want to know what it was about, and how you feel about me." In

this approach you've said nothing disrespectful, and you are very likely to get a respectful and loving reply.

A disrespectful form might go like this: "Who do you think you are? An old man like you, chasing after a young girl. You made a fool of yourself." Any fool knows that if you want to have a tremendous fight on your hands, the second approach is the one to take. When you value yourself and you value the other, you can feel good in the effort to communicate respectfully with your partner. You're not shaming yourself and collecting hurts until you can't repress the hurt anymore and so you blow up with rage.

Anger is an important part of intimacy. A relationship that has no capacity for anger fails to embrace the wholeness of a true relationship. This was a bitter learning experience for me and it's taken a lot of time to rebuild trust with the people I love. I'm happy to say that I haven't had a rage slip in a number of years now. Anger is one important way in which we experience our differences, and it is through our differences that we reveal ourselves to one another as the unique human beings we are.