

# **Constructive Anger**

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<http://mccue.cc/bob/spirituality.htm>

**Table of Contents**

Introduction..... 2

Anger – Is More Better? ..... 2

How to Express Anger ..... 3

The Watcher ..... 4

Fear and Desire ..... 4

Embracing the Inevitable ..... 5

Loyalty, Voice and Exit ..... 6

    Loyalty ..... 6

    Voice ..... 6

    Exit ..... 7

Stages of Faith ..... 8

Conclusion ..... 9

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How much more greivous are the consequences of anger than the causes of it.  
Marcus Aurelius

## Introduction

As a former Hugh Nibley fan, I am enjoying the writing career of his daughter, Martha Beck. She is publishing a book next spring entitled "Leaving the Saints – How I Lost the Mormons and Found My Faith". Martha has written a couple of other books, has a PhD in sociology, used to teach at BYU, and is a regular columnist with The Oprah Magazine. Her article on anger and its uses in the October 2004 edition of "O" (I am not a regular reader, but my wife and daughters are) is likely based on the content of her forthcoming book, although she does not mention Mormonism. It was thought provoking enough that I will summarize and comment on a few of her key ideas.

Before proceeding, I will make it clear that I am not critical of Beck's article. Given the nature of her qualifications and other writings, I am sure that she understands the things I am about to point out. She had a few columns of space with which to work, and so focussed on a piece or two of the puzzle. I am using the her article as an excuse to pull together in a manageable format some ideas I think are important and related to what she had to say.

## Anger – Is More Better?

Beck provides a test that the reader can take to determine what might be called his "doormat" index. That is, how much do you get pushed around and simply seethe instead of doing something about it? She posits that this is unhealthy; that some ranting and raving is a good thing. And that we can learn to listen to and channel our anger in constructive ways.

I agree, to a point. People who are constantly walked on should learn to assert themselves. Listening to the part of them that gets angry, and acting on their feelings, is a good way to start down that path. Much has been written about the difficulty members of authoritarian cultures have regarding individuation (See Richard Nisbett, "The Geography of Thought" for example). The doormat syndrome is to a large degree part of the same family of problems, in my view.

Beck quotes the great Chinese philosopher Lau-tzu as authority for the proposition that we should expand our anger in order to eventually contract it. I suggest that such expansion is best done sparingly, in the privacy of our own homes, with a few close friends or in the anonymity of an Internet bulletin board.

When dealing with anger directed toward other people, I incline toward the philosophy of another Chinese great, Sun-tzu ("The Art of War") who advised strategies that achieve our objectives without confrontation to the extent possible, often by creating the appearance (if not the reality) of a win-win outcome. He is also big on understanding those who oppose us, and using that knowledge to enable both parties to get what they want to the extent possible.

I also have found Dr. Martin Seligman's approach to be useful (See Seligman's book "Authentic Happiness" and website at <http://www.authentichappiness.org/>). He indicates that for the most part, the things we express feed on themselves and contrary for Freud, nothing will explode if anger is held in. In fact, it will dissipate as long as we deal with its causes, and will grow to the extent we feed it by ranting, raving, throwing stuff, etc.

It is easy to get into a mode where expressing anger begets more anger, and a depressing downward emotional spiral results. As Seligman points out, as long as we are expressing and feeling anger, fear, or any of the other powerful reptilian core emotions, the more delicate mechanisms that allow us to experience joy cannot be felt. So, I recognize that there is a place for raging (a small place), and that it is particularly important for those who have been prevented from connecting with how they feel to learn to do so.

## **How to Express Anger**

Beck notes:

"...if you grew up with indifferent or cruel caretakers, you may have a lifetime supply of stored anger. Worse, you may also have a core belief that expressing or acting on this anger is worse than useless, that it will never lead to positive changes and may well get you punished. You project your childhood helplessness onto situations where anger might be just the ticket."

Beck's ideas as to how to react to this anger are good ones. She advises ranting to tolerant friends who have been warned that you need to rant. She advises writing out your anger – including therapeutic four letter expletives. She advises learning as much as possible about what made you angry because that often makes anger go away all by itself. As Longfellow notes:

"If we could read the secret history of our enemies, we should find in each man's life sorrow and suffering enough to disarm any hostility."

But, Beck does not warn against getting stuck in a place where bitching becomes you. It is easy to do that, and a warning in that regard hence serves a useful purpose. The longer we continue to bitch, the longer we defer peace.

## **The Watcher**

The most useful ideas I have found in this regard comes from Buddhist theory. The first is that of the "watcher". The watcher is a part of us that can be taught to observe the rest of us. "That's interesting" is my watcher's most frequent comment. I get mad, for example, and my watcher says, "That's interesting. Why do you think that made you mad?" and off we go into the introspective process to which Beck alludes.

The watcher is kind of like a coach we hire and instruct as to what we want done. "I am having trouble with a slice", I might tell my golf coach, "so watch my swing and let me know if you see anything I should change." And I tell my watcher, "I seem to behave stupidly when x,y,z happens. Keep an eye on that and tell me what you think is going on." It is amazing how much more information we can pull out of ourselves by focussing in this way. Anyone who has seen a stage hypnotist in action will not doubt that there are loads of information waiting to be dug out of us. The trick is how to do it. Going to a therapist for many people is a good way to get the ball rolling. And training our own internal "watcher" does great things for many people who have stuck with it long enough to make it work.

Some Buddhist teachers warn that we should not allow the "watcher pendulum" to swing too far because it can rob life of its spontaneity. I have not found that to be a problem. And I doubt many will. More than anything, my watcher helps me to enjoy the spectacular show my emotions put on. If something that is likely to get me in trouble appears (which is rare as far as I know – others will surely disagree), the watcher suggests investigation and hopefully a change in course will occur. But mostly, the watcher just says, "Wow, that was really something! Let's see that one again in slow motion!" and the show goes on. A piece I wrote last weekend ("ChangingSeasons"-see <http://www3.telus.net/public/rcmccue/bob/documents/rs.changing%20seasons.pdf>) that touched me as deeply as anything I have ever written was a result of precisely that process, as is most of what touches me in a creative way.

## **Fear and Desire**

The watcher idea is rooted in the core Buddhist concept that most of life's difficulties are caused by fear and desire. The famous Buddhist "middle way" lies between those two forces where neither can unduly influence us. That is the path The Buddha found that enabled him to finally sit in peace beneath the Bo tree. It is also the force that creates power in the martial arts and other athletic experiences (See "Zen in the Zone" <http://www3.telus.net/public/rcmccue/bob/documents/zen%20in%20the%20zone.pdf>). It is where much great art originates. And it is the space those who meditate seek. Etc.

Fear and desire – in their extreme manifestations – are two of the reptilian core's primary emotions. That is, they originate in the oldest part (in evolutionary terms) of our brains, and are linked ultimately to issues related to survival and

reproduction. In their milder forms, they correlate with activity in many of the brain's newer parts, such as the cerebral cortex – the wrinkly "grey matter" that wraps around everything else. The cerebral cortex is involved in our "rational" or "higher" functions like language, math, music etc., and most importantly for purposes of this discussion, is critical to feeling the things that make us happy. While its scalpel-like functions are suppressed by the reptilian core's sledgehammers, we will not feel peace or joy. And when a survival or reproduction issue comes up, or any of many other issues that just happen to light up the same machinery in the reptilian core (like, I might be kicked out of the family if I admit I don't believe in Mormonism any more), the cerebral cortex shuts down and we act on instinct. This reaction is fundamental to the cognitive dissonance ideas that have been so helpful from my point of view (See the relevant sections in "Do Smart Mormons Make Mormonism True?" and "Religious Faith: Enlightening or Blinding?" at <http://www3.telus.net/public/rcmccue/bob/spirituality.htm>). It is often fear that shuts down the ability to process information, just as occurs in the case of the wife whose husband is cheating. She is often the last to be able to see what is going on.

One way to think of the "watcher" is as a means to shut down the reptilian core and get the cerebral cortex back up and running. We do this by first asking ourselves why we are feeling as we are, and then doing some of the things Beck recommends, such as writing our feelings out, collecting information about what made us feel as we did, etc. And she is right to point out that, in effect, if we do not allow a watcher to speak to us, we are depriving ourselves of a valuable source of information.

### **Embracing the Inevitable**

The second foundational Buddhist idea I have found to be indispensable regarding anger management and finding joy, is this:

- We should do our best to understand our options;
- we should decide what we are capable of doing;
- we should decide if we are prepared to deal with the possible consequences of doing what we can do;
- we should do what we are prepared to do in that regard; and
- most importantly, we should then accept what happens to the extent we cannot reasonably do anything about it.

That is, we should not reluctantly go along with what life has served up after we have done the best we can, but rather should embrace it. And it is amazing what we can find to embrace when we are determined to live that way.

This is great advice, but hard to follow. I am slowly getting better at it. And I recognize in this regard what Seligman points out about our "set point" regarding

joy. Some people are naturally more ebullient than others, and there are limits as to how far we can change this. However, we each have a range within which our moods can be expected to fluctuate. It is possible to tend toward the upper end (joyful end) of that range. We can reasonably hope for no more than this.

So, I would suggest exploring our anger, using it to focus our attention, and then take steps to let it go, move on and enjoy as much as life as possible. And I think that is what Beck is saying as well.

I suggest that we try to channel our anger as soon as possible into self-conscious, confident assertiveness. Eventually, this will become automatic. Our watcher and we will hopefully merge on some issues as time passes, just as the coach stops talking when the issue he was asked to look at comes under control. We may then ask the coach to help us with something else, or just to keep her eyes open in general for things that look "interesting".

Using anger as an education signal instead of feeding it, in my experience, both feels better, and is more effective for all parties concerned than anger based human interactions are likely to be. Those with whom we deal will often react to anger with anger, and then no one goes home happy or with what they want.

### **Loyalty, Voice and Exit**

Beck is at her best, in my view, as she summarizes some big picture sociological theory and relates anger to it. She quotes Albert Hirschman as indicating that there are only three ways to deal with social systems: by loyalty, voice and exit.

#### ***Loyalty***

Those that are loyal stay within the social system and support it mostly without complaint. Many of the loyal feel impotent rage, or I would add, are so influenced by cognitive dissonance that they are not conscious of their anger and pain. As they become conscious, they perceive loyalty and suffering at the hands of whatever dominates them to be a virtue, as they are taught they should. So, for a time (and often forever) they simply suffer in silence. No "murmuring", remember? These people are the audience toward which Beck's article is primarily aimed. A large percentage of Mormondom is in this group, although many of them would be angered by that suggestion. Go see how a wife reacts when you accurately tell her that her husband is cheating on her. The very nature of the issue and the fear it raises is calculated to provoke an angry response, regardless of the truth. Many Mormons are in the same position. The nature of cog dis induced denial is such that it can only be seen by those experiencing it through the rear view mirror.

#### ***Voice***

Some attempt to give voice to their concerns, and to effect constructive change within their society. Some institutions are more amenable to change than others.

In general, the smaller and more democratically oriented the institution, the more changeable it will likely be.

The Mormon Church is huge, and completely non-democratic. Hence, those who attempt to go the "voice" route within Mormonism often end up quite quickly on the outside. That was my experience. In fact, the term "apostasy" is defined in Mormon leadership handbooks to include those who attempt to use their voice to cause what they perceive to be constructive change. Mormonism is designed to root those people out before they become a disruptive enough influence that they effect change that is not directed by Mormonism's leaders.

An acquaintance whose beliefs resemble mine has been serving as a Mormon Bishop for some time on the "voice" theory. I don't think he will make it much longer.

### ***Exit***

And here is what Beck has to say about exit:

"In severely dysfunctional systems, exit is the best option. People who are used to tolerating chronic rage resist this, staying far too long in toxic relationships, exploitive jobs, and other horrific situations. Anger is the good friend that urges us to leave these situations, that won't let us feel comfortable enduring mistreatment. If you think of chronic anger as your enemy, it is probably time you took its advice. ... "

I would add that chronic anger is a watcher trying to make her voice heard. Beck's advice that this is a voice that, in particular, should be heeded is a good one.

She continues:

"Sometimes exit entails physically leaving a person or organization. More often, though it means detaching at a deep emotional level by acknowledging that you are on different wavelengths. You wouldn't be angry if a mentally ill person told you that God speaks through fortune cookies; you'd just think this person was a few cans short of a six-pack. But if your family or religion espouses an equally odd doctrine, you might spend years thrashing about in anger until you fully released the belief. Mental exit is often more powerful than physical departure. And it can be a crucial escape when you want to physically exit but can't. You need the income from a rotten job until you have another income source, or credits from a stupid class in order to graduate. Try the Monte Cristo Exist, a strategy I named after the character in Dumas's famous novel who stayed sane in prison by trying to tunnel out. It takes him years, but because he's working on his escape every day, he survives. The Monte Cristo approach requires you to work every day on your escape plan (finding other means of support, improving your health, saving money) while tolerating an unsavoury situation just a bit longer."

I agree with that insightful bit of analysis. Beck does not mention Mormonism, but her history speaks for itself in this regard. She left. I left. Many others have left. And many more have stayed. I have no work of criticism for those who stay after understanding that nature of the institution and what staying likely holds in store for them the those who follow them. Such people usually begin to quietly withdraw their energies from Mormonism and live a more balanced life than the one Mormon leaders hold out as the ideal – that of the Mormon leader.

I feel badly for those who are unable as a result of cognitive dissonance or other similar forces to lift their heads high enough to see what is going on at the interface between their lives and Mormonism, and so become able to exercise their agency. Without information and the perspective it brings, individual agency cannot be exercised.

### **Stages of Faith**

If you frame Beck's discussion of the "exit" process within Fowler's "Stages of Faith" it makes even more sense, in my view. See the sections starting at p. 58 in the essay "Out of My Faith" at <http://www3.telus.net/public/rcmccue/bob/documents/out%20of%20my%20faith.pdf>. In a nutshell, the stages of faith are analogous to the stages of moral reasoning through which most people progress. Many people who have been raised in a controlling culture, such as the one that dominates most Mormons, are not able to progress to an individuated state. They are stuck in what Fowler calls "stage three" spirituality, where their way is the only right way and they are highly committed to their organization for that reason.

Those who individuate (moving through "stage four" into "stage five" spirituality) tend to recognize that it is good when others do something similar. This causes recognition of the good in many worldviews other than their own, thus creating a pluralistic and usually metaphoric outlook. However, stage four is a dark, traumatic place for many people, during which it seems like the world has collapsed into chaos and a great deal of anger must be processed with respect to the hypocrisies and deceptions of their former literalistic faith, the community that sponsors it, the people (often family members) who imposed it upon them, etc. Only to the extent that such anger has been processed, and let go, is a state of relative peace reached.

Fowler described my process to a tee. Beck addresses the anger that is felt during the stage four period of trauma, and makes some good suggestions as to how to channel it in the context of the larger process Fowler describes.

I particularly like the idea of a "Monte Cristo" escape from something like Mormonism. I was fortunate to go through my leaving the fold process at a time when I could pretty much just leave. Many are not in that situation. Beck's advice is bang on for them.

## **Conclusion**

Overall, I found Beck's article informative and thought provoking. I recommend it, and look forward to reading her book.