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TOXIC ANGER

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Life coach, author and columnist, Ruth Ostrow, wrote in an edition of the Weekend Australian Magazine (11/2/2006):

“Everywhere you look nowadays there are articles and advertisements on detox... There are detox kits, books promoting juice fasts and detox lounges specialising in colonic irrigation sprouting up like organic mung-beans on every street corner.

But, in all of the material I've read, nothing touches on the most toxic substance I've ever experienced, more caustic to the stomach than acidic foods, more damaging to the nervous system than drugs and alcohol - anger.”

She then went on to write:

“What's the use of consuming all the health products under the sun - the anti-wrinkle creams and longevity diets - if we continue to screw up our faces and our lives with toxic emotions?”

Ruth Ostrow's comments struck a resonance with me on many levels. The first was my own capacity to deal with stress and unwanted change. Like most people, I need to have at least a limited sense of control over my own life. I don't like other motorists putting my wellbeing at risk with, what I consider to be, their erratic and irresponsible driving. But let's not mention my own poor driving at times. I don't like feeling as though I'm being backed into a corner by other people's demands and expectations. Whether those demands be from family, people in my workplace or the ever mounting pile of bills that arrive each month. But let's not mention my own severe demands and expectations of other people. All of this and more can leave me feeling angry.

On another level, I can feel so angry with myself at times. Those times when I recognize and admit that I'm not the most perfect husband, father, friend, son, brother and Pastor. These are times when I realize that I have truly underperformed and have missed the mark in terms of the relationships that are so very important to me. And so I direct my anger towards myself.

On yet another level, I see other people's anger. I see anger when a husband and father abuses members of his own family. I see anger when people of different nationalities gather at a popular beach and belt the living daylight out of each other for

reasons that none can adequately explain and justify. I see anger when people in the workplace bully and harass their workmates. I see anger when a person loses a loved one, their marriage, their home, their job, their health and vitality. I see anger when people allow a difference of opinion to escalate into a conflict of ideologies and noxious fundamentalism kicks in – religious or otherwise. I easily see anger without even looking, and when I see it, it takes me right back to my own shame. Anger can be a very toxic emotion when it is unleashed and allowed to rip through the lives of innocent people. It's putrid and venomous.

Is anger always bad? Well, no. Sometimes anger motivates people to do great things. It shows itself as an aggression that propels an athlete to succeed, a parent to protect, a leader to lead and an adventurer to persevere and discover. It's a harnessed and constructive rage that brings blessing and even builds relationships. Anger can also be one of the voices of grief. You've probably seen the image of a parent cradling a dead child in their arms? Lives pointlessly lost in some protracted urban war in the middle east, Balkans or the African continent. Despair finds its voice in anger.

So is anger good or bad? We generally measure anger against its effects and benefits. Ruth Ostrow calls it *Toxic* but we've seen that it's not always the case. Anger can be good. It all depends on how it affects people.

God can be angry. In the Bible we read stories of how God's anger burns against people who walk away from him. They walk away to build empty spiritual relationships with things that falsely lay claim to their hearts. We read of how God's anger burns against those who would bring harm to his children – to you and to me. And we read of how God's anger burns against those who harm the innocent and defenseless – the widows, the orphans, the foreigners and the poor.

Is God's anger toxic? If we look at it trivially we might answer yes. God does seem punitive and ruthless at times. But if we have a close look at what's going on we see that God becomes angry for two general reasons. The first is when the truth isn't told about him. When his name is used to harm rather than bless and when he is ridiculed and portrayed as anything less than a loving father. The second is when his love, and his driving will to share that love with us is threatened. God will not tolerate anything coming between you, me and himself. It might be that we want to give up on our relationship with him and lose our faith. It might be that another person or thing is coming between us and God. It might be that Satan is placing us under extraordinary pressure through the events of our lives to abandon all hope in God. God directs his anger against these things. We call this, God's righteous anger. The writer of the book of Nehemiah recognized this when he quoted these words:

But you are a forgiving God, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love.

(Nehemiah 9:17b)

God's anger grows out of his love for us, and so we can say with confidence his anger isn't toxic! There's no selfishness or spite in his anger. There's only the love of a father that desperately wants no-one to be lost from life with him.

So what about our anger? The writer of James in the New Testament of the Bible says:

My friends, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, for a person's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires.

James 1:19-20

So we are advised to avoid selfish, spiteful, cruel and explosive anger. The anger that is toxic; the anger that distorts and misshapes our faces; that ruins relationships and bears bitterness as its only fruit. In one of his letters St. Paul says:

In your anger do not sin. Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold.

Ephesians 4:26-27

So I encourage you to direct your anger at those things that threaten to lead you and others away from God. Remember - righteous anger is a gift and a discipline from God that you receive through faith, and faith comes through your relationship with God's living word, Jesus Christ.

So your anger will no longer be toxic and destructive but beneficial to you and those around you.