

Anger and the Grieving Process

~ by Chaplain Leroy Joesten
Lutheran Minister and Chaplain at
Lutheran General Hospital
Park Ridge, Illinois.

Anger is but one of many emotional reactions to the painful reality of death. It is important to recognize anger as a natural, human response. If we can allow ourselves to be aggravated, irritated, even angered, by relatively minor life disappointments, we are certainly entitled to feel angry when faced with one of life's most devastating experiences — the death of a child. Anger is not chosen, however, whether to remain angry, to refuse to surrender it or to resolve itis a choice.

Even though it is a natural, emotional response and is not willed, anger does have some objectives. **Initially, anger is PROTEST** — an attempt to ward off a reality which is seen as too devastating to one's own sense of survival. It is an attempt to undo an event which is untimely and unwarranted. This phase of anger is the most acute, the most intense and therefore, perhaps, the most frightening. But anger must be expressed or ventilated in order for it to burn out. The reality of the death must be acknowledged; it cannot be fought or denied.

Anger is a means of RETRIEVAL. It craves a target. It may be directed at the doctor, at God, at oneself, or even at the deceased. Anger seeks to locate the author of the death with the hope that somehow our deceased child can be retrieved. This desire to retrieve or to have our dead child return to life continues for some time. Anger continues to feed the hope that somehow the death can be reversed. What eventually must be accepted is not only that the death has occurred but also that it is irreversible. As unfair and untimely as it is, the death cannot be undone.

Anger is a means of CONTROL. Anger erupts when we have lost control. It is an emotional response designed to regain control. It is a defense against accepting one's own sense of impotence. This helplessness may be the most painful dimension of a beloved child's death. Anger must be vented and burned out before we can, or in order for us to, get close to our helplessness. Our impotence to change the event needs to be accepted.

Once we can accept anger as a natural, human response, we can focus on its proper or improper expression. Instead of talking of good or bad ways of expressing anger, I prefer to speak of constructive or counter productive means of expressing anger. Constructive expression leads toward some form of resolution or dissolution of anger, while counter productive venting perpetuates, perhaps even magnifies, the effects of the death of a child.

Constructive venting of anger includes verbal and non-verbal means. It is important for people to have permission to verbalize their most intense feelings of anger, regardless of where the anger is targeted. Anger at God is as permissible as at any other target. If we give thanks to God for good times, it seems only natural that God would bear the brunt of at least some of our anger. It is also permissible and common that our dead child receive some of our anger. Even if the words must be yelled or screamed, the expression is healthy and therapeutic. The only caution may be to be in the company of someone who is understanding and accepting of our needs to verbalize the full intensity of our anger.

Anger can also be ventilated non-verbally. Crying itself can be a release of anger, especially the more intense and uncontrollable crying. Crying is a natural means of releasing frustration, helplessness, pain. Allowing ourselves to do those things which force the tears are good things to do: listening to music, looking at pictures, doing things that remind us of our child. Often these are avoided so that we will not cry, but they are a natural means of reinforcing the reality. Other non verbal means of expressing anger include physical exercise (running, walking, golf, tennis). The more physically demanding the better, because it forces a deeper physical release of stored up anger. (Scrubbing floors, washing walls, chopping wood, pounding nails are also good).

But there are counterproductive ways of dealing with anger. Repressing it so that it cannot come out is a common means. Displacing it on people who are either ignorant of the death or who are unable to understand the origin of the anger is counterproductive because it drives people away, causing even greater emotional isolation. Displacement may include being critical, harsh or even cruel to family members or friends for no apparent reason. Other counterproductive means include excess alcohol and drug abuse. Smoking or eating may increase. All of these make oneself the target of the anger, decreasing one's self esteem and self worth. Some may idealize their child, making him or her perfect or more than human. This can be a cover up for anger at the dead child which is too painful to express. Vengeance or taking the law into one's own hands is counterproductive. However, seeking justice through proper channels is a legitimate and potentially constructive outlet.

It is important to understand that people vary greatly in their experience of anger. Some people are said to have short fuses and erupt with very little provocation. Others are said to have the patience of a saint and are slow to anger. People also vary in their expression of anger; some find it easy while others find it difficult. These differences need to be respected so that people are free to pursue the most fitting expression of anger for themselves.

Anger must be expressed along with other emotional responses in order for it finally to be put to rest. Anger must be resolved if we are ever to be at peace with the fact of our child's death. Unexpressed anger leads to unresolved anger, which in turn leads to bitterness and sometimes depression. Bitterness is when a person's entire view of life is tainted and distorted. A bitter person is one who refuses to see the beauty and goodness and joy which, in spite of the tragedy of a child's death, still

constitutes much of life. Indeed, the occasion of those qualities being restored in our life is a living tribute to the importance and lasting value of our child's life.

The goal of grief is to say goodbye to our child on all levels, to embrace the contribution our child was able to make to life and to exercise gratitude for the life that was, albeit all too short. To identify and express anger as a natural, human response is one of the steps on the way to recovery.