

(116) ANGER AND ROWS

1. What do the words mean? Etymology.

1.1 The word anger has a complicated history. In Middle English it meant distress. In the history in other languages there are meanings like: Grief, sorrow, trouble, affliction, hot displeasure. There is a relationship with anguish which means: Severe bodily or mental suffering. The same root in Greek and Latin means to squeeze, to strangle. Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary gives as meaning, distinguishing it from ire, rage, fury, indignation and wrath: "ANGER is the general term for the emotional reaction of extreme displeasure and suggests neither a definite degree of intensity nor a necessary outward manifestation." I disagree about the "definite degree of intensity". The intensity can be enormous, even when the anger does not "break out". Anyway, all these old meanings of the word and its root still play a role.

1.2 The word row in the meaning of quarrel is new. Webster gives as meaning: A noisy disturbance or quarrel. The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology: Violent commotion, noisy dispute. The word appears in this meaning in the XVIIIth century and was "of slang or base origin". The origin is unknown. My fantasy is that the origin is quite clear: The word comes from the experience that when several people who are rowing a boat, make, when things go wrong, much noise and disappear in an enormous chaos. In that case you really have a good row: Much noise, people disagreeing frantically and very soon becoming very violent...

2. Becoming angry

Why do we become angry? We are, in some manner, put down. Our position in the relationship, in which we become or are angry, is threatened. We resort to, we are in the mood to resort to violence, in order to restore the relationship in the manner we would like it to be or which is necessary for us to live with self-respect, to live without shame and humiliation, generally without the (lasting) damage done to us, which we fear.

Becoming angry is a stage in ritual. Comedy is over, we leave the joking behind us, we are nearing or in tragedy. The Moor, the difficulty which is between us, the scapegoat has to be driven out, in order that the old order is restored. If things go well, it even is not the old order, it is a new, a better one. A difficulty which obviously, anyway as a possibility, was lingering around, threatening our relationship, has been driven out. The relationship is more free than it was before the row.

But in fact the situation is often more complicated than the original scapegoat-situation. In most of the rows the scapegoat is not somebody else, whom we simply try to get rid of once and for ever by making a row, in order to get peace. Most of our rows are with people we cannot get rid of and/or don't wish to get rid of. We make in fact the row to find a way forward together, although often, during the row, our only conscious wish often is to get rid of her/him/them altogether.

Of course time and again we try to get solutions in situations in which we shy away from a row by scapegoating somebody else, an outsider, as the cause of everything. When we agree, for the moment the necessity of having a row seems to have

disappeared. But often when we have done that it mostly becomes very soon clear that it did not really work. We still have the difficulties together.

It is clear, when we become angry and organise a row, we normally don't wish to drive the other out. We wish to drive out something out of the other we have difficulties with. As soon as we clearly see this, we need insights and decisions we mostly forget when we become or are angry:

2.1 Having difficulties with somebody, with her/his doing or being, these difficulties are in us ourselves too. In the mimesis with the other we took them into us and lost so our freedom. In a deep sense we have the difficulties with ourselves, not with the other(s) in the first place. If there is a driving out, we have to drive out of ourselves, to become free ourselves.

2.2 As soon as we see that, we can make a choice:

2.2.1 We Smile. We see, we understand what is going on. We are the victim of our own mimesis and rivalling. It does not any longer matter who or how the other(s) (in this particular situation) is/are. We are free. The situation changes, because we don't any longer rival with the other. For the rivalling it always needs two parties. When one of them stops, the rivalling itself stops. So the other has to change too. How, we never will know beforehand. It might not necessarily be that it is immediately a change for the better. But we are free, we can wait.

2.2.2 We make an argument. The argument is based on trust. We understand what is going on, we understand the mechanisms and so we trust. Really trusting ourselves we trust the other (who comes/is, without knowing this, in the mimesis with us) and we begin the argument. We try to find a good solution, but if we don't succeed, we still know that the world won't fall apart. We will still exist and be free, free to make new decisions.

3. Of course you will object that all this is not about anger, rage, rows at all. When we are angry, really make rows, we just don't consider all this. We go ahead! Or we do not, because we become (very) afraid and shrink, without considering either, back. Nevertheless, there is a big difference between:

3.1 Rows in which we, deep down, have trust. It does not really matter, in the end, if we win or lose. What matters is that there comes clearness, that difficulties are resolved, that we are freed of the conflict and go further with our life again. We are in the context of ritual. In ritual there always is a, eventually preconscious, knowing that in the end things will go well, that after the havoc and the chaos there will be order.

3.2 Rows, in which exactly this trust is missing. We are engaging in fact in a sacrificial chaos, in which victims will be picked arbitrarily and in which we ourselves always can be the victim(s). It is ritual that can go very wrong. We are very afraid and if we undertake the row in fact we are flying forward.

4. The fears for anger and rows.

We all are afraid of anger and rows. We all know that it can go wrong. We are all afraid of losing of being victimised, of being left behind miserable. There are several origins of these fears:

4.1 Because we all are very afraid of sacrificial chaos, fears which are stored in our very cells, as old as culture itself, we (nearly) immediately moralise everybody who becomes angry and begins a row. Always looking around for (in fact arbitrarily chosen) scapegoats, people who make rows are very good ones indeed. They in fact could be believed of doing what originally the scapegoat did: Making chaos out of order. So by becoming angry, beginning a row, we run the risk to lose the fight even before it really begins, because just everybody is siding against us.

4.2 Nearly all of us have old memories of losing. When we were (small) children and became angry, began rows, we often lost them in a horrible manner. When we had parents who were rude and violent to us (and these often are parents, well seen by everybody, generally reliable, nice people, which makes us again more helpless), destroying us utterly when we tried to stand up for ourselves, these memories too are stored in our very being, and without being able to think rationally about it we are very, very afraid indeed of our own anger and of ever making a row, because without knowing why we are, irrationally and totally, sure that we will lose and that the consequences will be horrible for us.

4.3 In fact if we had these experiences things even might be worse. We had these clashes with our parents when we were (very) young, very impressionable, very mimetic. So our parents came and still are very deep in us, being more or less an intrinsic part of us. So if we make a row, this row interferes with the realities living in us, the enormous tensions which are in us, the living remnants of what once happened. On the one hand we are, just because of that, very keen to make rows, especially rows which remind us, eventually without our being conscious of it, of the old, lost ones, in order in fact to win at last these old ones. On the other hand the new one gets entangled into the old ones. The always threatened equilibria might thus be destroyed and the tensions in us, the fight in us might become so hard, that we are destroyed ourselves. We don't win, we strangle ourselves.

4.4 We can, very rationally, very wise, come to the conclusion that it is right to be afraid of the row, that the issue is not big enough to risk a row, which eventually carries with it the very big risks for the relationship, so for the life of (the) other(s) and our own life. We simply shrug our shoulders and forget the feelings, the rivalry which provokes the row. We cope with the difficulties in a rational, in fact free manner.

5. Life must be learned.

As humans we have to learn everything. We don't have instincts which lead us. What we did not learn in the time we should have, we have to learn it later. What does this mean when it is about anger and rows?

5.1 We have to learn that any time we become angry, it is not any longer really about the issue. When we are angry, the other is in us, we are rivalling with the other in us. Is it just the point in case which makes us angry, is it really (that) important, or is it the other, the relationship we have with her/him/them, the rivalling relationship? Which is really the point in case? Is it really worthwhile? If so, are there possibilities to solve the problem, without becoming angry?

5.2 Especially when we become very angry, eventually for ourselves and those around us incomprehensibly angry, we can be sure, that we are repeating very old fights in which we lost. So we have to sort out. What really is at stake? How to handle this? It is clear that, certainly when we are overwhelmed by old memories, we cannot sort out alone. We need a friend, somebody we trust, to tell him/her our stories, so getting some insight, in any case in the issue involved.

5.3 If we time and again become very afraid that we will be destroyed when we become angry and make a row, when the past is so strong in us, strangling us, it might be very helpful to find ways to that past, to understand what happened and how we reacted. Talking about it with good friends, finding new “facts” and new insights in what happened can be a great help. And if it seems useful it might be a help to find somebody who is, or might be more acquainted with all this, a “professional” of some sort.

5.4 There might be another way out of the havoc, the way of forgiving. If we seek this way and are found by it, we need not sort out everything. This way is in a sense a paradoxical one, especially when we are strangled by the tensions and the fears: Being so maltreated, nonetheless we only can forgive by accepting forgiveness, by experiencing forgiveness. Only getting, experiencing forgiveness we can forgive and so become free. Even when we go a more psychotherapeutic way we certainly, in the end, have to forgive too. When life is destroyed, understanding can be very important to find peace, but real peace only comes out of forgiveness, receiving and giving it.

6. Trust

In fact it is all about trust. The trust that our life is safe, “hidden” in the lives, the hearts of others, of God. In that trust we really can think, with the whole of our being, to find ways out of the difficulties. Eventually by making a row, knowing that it is ritual, not ending up in sacrificial chaos and the destroying of ourselves or others. Or by giving up, shrug our shoulders and turn away, free.