

Anger Alternatives

by Sophie Reynolds

There are many provocative situations in our interactions with police or soldiers which can “make our blood boil”. For those times when we don’t want either to get angry or become “narky” or aggressive here are some perspectives, exercises and methods to play with.

Motivation

Prepared/informed “spontaneity” is likely to be freer and more powerful than unexamined reaction. The power of the moment, creativity, and our capacity to sense and do just the right thing at the right moment - to “seize the moment” wisely, are the tools of empowered non-intimidated activism. We are more likely to be available for them if we are not managed by anger, fear, or pain. It is important to be aware of the effects getting really angry could have on you, on the action, on other activists, and the police - and decide how you want to play it. Anger that controls us is often anger that generates fear, and often comes from fear. If the need underneath is to live in a safer world, is acting from and generating fear going to help?

Some roles, such as legal observer, or police liaison, carry with them the necessity to keep communication with the police open, and the feeling that in this way you are serving the other activists can be a support in “keeping it together”. Some actions *are* places to express, and make visible how you feel about an issue. This can be empowering, energising, releasing, relieving and affirming. Even if we are witnessed by those who share our feelings rather than by relevant decision-makers there can be great value in such witnessing and demonstration. But there is a huge difference between having anger, and anger having us. Between being angry, or becoming an angry being.

There are techniques for “in the moment” anger management. They need practice and commitment; and lots are more fun to practice with others.

Reflect on the situation: usually, in nonviolent direct action (nvda), we are not directly meeting the “top” people, so our ability to confront them with the power of our anger - to try to touch, transform, get respect, wake them up - is blocked. The structures of oppressive power maintain a situation where the people/servants/co-creators of the structures have hearts and minds that are difficult to touch; physically, it is difficult to get to them - and they are rationally, ideologically and emotionally well defended. So we have to be very creative and skillful. Confronting and making visible injustice, which is part of what we are trying to do with nvda, allows out the emotions that are born of the relations of injustice – relations which the power structures are investing huge energy in blocking out, denying, hiding, shutting down, controlling. By confronting an injustice head-on we are able to release different emotions locked in the situation. Not just anger, but fear, hurt, need, sorrow, guilt, despair as well.

When we feel angry we need to know about this anger, it is part of nonviolent change; we need to know about it so that we are not blindly pushed about by it and so we don't miss the message of it and the potential for change that we have opened. The anger we feel can be maintained by several sources: our personal history or present situation of injustice and disempowerment; our shared history and present injustice; the "anger in the system"; our fear; our pain; our needs not to be insulted, not to be part of a state that murders, and to be listened to, to be able to contribute ... to be free to create lives and structures of our choice.

Anger is vital energy; it can bring clarity, change and freedom. We must know what's going on. For those who don't experience a lot of anger perhaps you tend to feel a lot of grief at the situation. It may be that you are also sharing in the anger at injustice - you also have a connection to that energy source – but what can also happen to us is a different form of disempowerment: We withdraw, shut down, feel role-less, ineffective, depressed. Anger as disengagement can defeat us by harming our presence at an action. Internalising anger is again getting caught by the violence in the situation.

Consider whether getting angry with police is a diversion of your energy, a diversion of the action from the actual issue to policing methods. Understand that nvda is putting yourself, your body, in the spokes of the machinery; the machinery is violent and contact with it will hurt and be frightening. And it contains lots of latent as well as active aggression. So contact with anger is part of the deal. One of the roles of the police/army is to get/absorb anger for the state - they are buffers.

So what are empowering ways of experiencing anger? Basic is the idea that empowering anger affirms one's boundaries. It directs energy into construction, and creativity. It clarifies. It grounds and connects you with your intention, value and purpose.

Useful tactics to cope with anger in situ:

Options include suppression, diversion, riding it, releasing it, creation, and hyping it up to be ridiculous. In that moment, do anything you can to break anger's hold, and create space for you to choose how you want to go on. *Think before you speak.* Keep your mouth shut if you know speaking is going to lead to a mess. Talk to yourself about anything that helps - about why not to get angry; or how many tins of cat food you need to get before going on holiday. You can list your family's birthdays... *Get into your body* - breathe; breathe deeply; feel your feet on the ground; lie/sit/all fours on the ground; feel the different parts of your body; let some of the energy out by shaking, jumping, singing; hug/grip a robust friend tightly; make yourself as small/tight/scrunched up (whole body in a ball or just your top half) as possible, then open out as large, tall, big as possible; shake, each part of your body, hand, wrist, arm, torso, hips, ... while breathing deeply taking in more air than you can imagine you could need - flick your arms hard as if you are shaking water off them, or like a dog: this can let the energy out rather than it

staying stored up in you ready to spark off. *Direct the energy into something constructive* –preferably tangible and physical (which includes the physical activity of writing a report furiously). Dance, drum, dig a tunnel, in good weather bring a huge canvas/ sheet and marker pens and make art/graffiti. *Know when there is no more point talking to a policeperson.* Acknowledge to yourself when you are getting angry and try voicing it - just that you are angry now, why –and walking away. Or if it's not physically possible to walk away, take your awareness away to *any* pre-decided place – something grounding and diverting, eg your home, the sea, the dance-floor, what you did yesterday... any obsessive thoughts you have easily at hand planning, relationship, money, pain...

Another option is to *take your awareness deep inside you* - to how your body feels in contact with the ground.

Further strategies

Much useful work can be done in advance, to help you cope with anger. In addition to the analysis suggested above about motivation and intention and effects, consider these strategies:

- *Separate the police as people from the institution.* Know that they get orders to ignore, chat up, repeat themselves, use pressure points, be easy, be rough.
- *Know about what makes you most angry* - is it being insulted, patronised, hurt, ignored, not allowed to move, seeing others being hurt, being thwarted in your plans? Decide how you can deal with those situations when they arise and in what form they might arise on the action you are going to.
- *Practice with friends (in a safe way in a workshop)* - have them heap scorn and abuse on you ... obstruct you in making your supper ... tie your legs together ... hit you with a rolled up newspaper baton.
- *Find what keeps you cool, centred, how you want to be!* There may be a phrase that embodies exactly what you don't find acceptable, or about why you are doing what you are doing, or what your belief is that leads you to act, which you can just repeat aloud or to yourself, steadily and firmly. This repetition can bring you more and more into your base of power and purpose. There may be a symbol, word, image that can do this for you.
- *Practice connecting it with your likely sources of boiling blood. Similarly a symbol, tune, image can momentarily* - which is often enough - break the grip on you of a strong wave of angry reaction. You could link in your mind patronising policeman with a yellow banana, a muppet... .
- *Know about how you behave when you get a) angry, b) aggressively angry.* Do you get verbal, physical, shut down, contemptuous, sarcastic, contained, focused, hateful etc?
- *Identify and communicate to yourself* - Can you identify and communicate to yourself, and to others, why you are angry and what is the fear/concern/pain/need that the anger is about?

- *Choose roles in action that will support you.* Consider provocations that may arise through the action and prepare options for yourself. So if you are planning to decorate a fence, but you can't get there, how can you increase the likelihood of getting there - group effort, legal argument, timing, etc. If you still can't, then what will you do with the vision you had, what can you do instead as a branch out of that vision rather than a dead end? If you had to give up the fence decorator role altogether, how else could you choose to actualize your purpose and presence at the action?
- *What else could you create out of the raw materials of the situation?* Prepare with your affinity group, or others going to the action, how they could play a role in your keeping the power of anger rather than getting disempowered by it. Discuss what is challenging for each of you ... you'll come up with responses, humour and tools... For example, call for a friend, keep talking to or close to a friend, throughout the action.
- *Practice.* Go to actions and try things out, lose it a few times to learn. It is not as if we are going to blow our last chances. Screaming, being angry at the police, can also sometimes be a way just doing what we have to do. If you use anger control/suppression methods, make sure you release it, debrief afterwards, congratulate yourself and preferably get others to afterwards. And use the energy to get involved in long-term change!