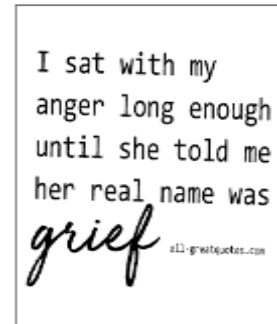


Grief and Loss series, #3 from Fr. Tom Konopka

I am so mad this happened!

Early in my career as a social worker, I developed an interest in anger management. It is a fascinating reality in people's lives and can be expressed in so many ways depending on the person, culture, gender, etc. The anger that erupts when we grieve is often a direct correlation with the depth of our pain.



In our brains, all mammals are hot wired to protect themselves. Most of the time, we either run away or we fight. As humanity developed, the threats we encountered were not always the saber tooth tiger on the path or the illness lurking around the corner that the neighbors were dying from. We are still hot wired to respond to a threat that is tangible, but often a threat is a part of our thought processes or our world view. Someone dies; it threatens our stability, our worldview, and our sense of fairness. When we experience the pain of loss, facing our own mortality, or the rawness of grief, the anger protects us from the pain, just like a band aid protects a cut on our arm. The anger can also arise from how unfair death is. Why would a pastor die suddenly or in an accident? How can God take a child? What did I do wrong that my marriage ended, or my significant other left me? What did I miss, that someone took his or her life? Why did the diocese remove a priest that we liked?

One of the hardest parts of anger when we grieve is that we must accept our anger at the person who has died or left us. The reasons for our anger are varied, but I realized some time ago, that the anger is in correlation to who that person was to us. When someone commits suicide, the family and friends become angry, because he or she never turned to them for help or understanding. People will often say that if the person went to the doctor earlier and not ignored the symptoms, they might still be alive.

So often, our anger is directed at God, because we have no other place to put it. Like any good parent or friend, He listens and sits with us. Our God will never run away from our anger. We often try to run away from the Lord or our anger blocks our relationship with Him. God will never stop loving us and He will always be there knocking at the walls we create.

There is a danger with this part of the process. Anger, if not managed in a healthy way, can affect a person's mental and physical health. Freud said that anger toward the self could be a cause of depression. The anger is turned at the self. Depression can manifest itself in many ways. For others, the anger is turned out toward the world, relationships are damaged, and the person can alienate him or herself from others.

The healthiest way to deal with the energy of anger is to use it to build. The organization Mothers Against Drunk Driving came from the anger that arose when mothers and fathers had to deal with the death of their child because of the choice of others to drive under the influence. Other groups have arisen because people reacted to the circumstances of why a person died.

So, how do we deal with it?

First and foremost, admit it and find ways to express it. Too often, many grow up with messages about anger that are not healthy. Often, women receive the message that it is not ok for a woman to express her anger. In my experience, anger must be expressed in healthy ways. If not, it can lead to health issues; physical, mental, and spiritual. One way many people deal with anger is to write about it and express it in nonviolent ways. Talking about it in a nonjudgmental way will help. We all need to remember that anger has a physiological component that needs to be “burned off.” Exercise, meditation, yoga, learning mindfulness, etc. are ways to help deal with it. Interestingly, most of the anger management professionals today do not advocate hitting a tree, a pillow, etc. If it works - fine, but, for many people, doing something like that keeps the “anger valve” open in the brain. Anger is complex mixture of brain impulses and messages to different glands of the body. The best way to deal with this part is to allow it to calm down. Once the physical part is relaxed, then a person can deal with what is under the anger. Usually, it is the reality of the loss and the pain associated with the loss.