

On My Mind: Pandemic anger



Early one morning this summer, as I rode a horse down a narrow road, I saw a truck barreling in my direction. I signaled to the driver to slow down with a wave of my hand, but instead of slowing down, he sped up. Filled with righteous indignation, I shouted “SLOW DOWN!” as he drove past. What surprised me — even more than my uncharacteristic outburst — was the surge of pleasurable feelings it gave me. It felt good to get angry — especially at an anonymous stranger at whom I felt entitled to express my anger, and whom I would likely never knowingly encounter again.

A lot of people seem to be letting off steam these days. I stopped to talk with someone I know in the halls at the hospital and asked, “Do you find yourself getting more angry now than before the pandemic?” “You bet,” was the answer. “I am alone when not at work. I can’t see my children or my mother. We FaceTime every day, but this is really getting to be too much.” A friend who runs a local shop told me, “I am just getting sick of the isolation. I like to connect with people by reading their body language and facial expressions. Now I can’t see their faces behind the masks, and with friends and family, most of the time we are just

talking on the phone or Zoom.” Another friend told me, “I feel so much anger inside, but I don’t know what to do with it. It’s like 9/11: Who is there to get angry at?”

Americans are less happy than we have been since the measure of happiness started being tracked 50 years ago (see bit.ly/2QwUe9J). The study suggests that “the unique and unprecedented coronavirus crisis is having a negative impact on the well-being of Americans, and the public is reacting differently than after other national tragedies.” Add to that the national upheaval in race relations, political distress and division, and extreme economic uncertainty, and there’s a lot to be anxious and unhappy about.

In the last issue of Arts and Ideas, Peter Kramer, one of America’s pre-eminent writer-psychiatrists and part-time Chilmark resident, adds a poignant perspective regarding frustration and loss as a result of the pandemic (see bit.ly/32wA59n).

“Friendships that buffer primary relationships” he writes, “have been pushed into the background. Misunderstandings that might come and go in life as it once was now accumulate, become fixed, loom large, and lead to disappointment and resentment. So much is at stake. We’re grieving, some of us. Jobs are at risk, and savings. Education is on hold. Childcare is complicated. And then there’s the illness, which is to say, debility and, finally, life or death.”

Much of the distress and anger seems to crystalize around the issue of whether people need to wear masks or not.* A group of people on the Woods Hole shuttle bus got into a physical altercation over wearing masks (see bit.ly/MaskFight). A friend told me about walking down the street when two young women stopped to pet her dog. They seemed to delight in the dog. But when my friend said, “You know, girls, you really should be wearing masks,” the girls began to shout at her and hurl expletives. A restaurant worker in downtown Edgartown told me that when he passes someone walking down the street without a mask, he wants to slug them and tell them to go back where they came from. The mask issue is interesting partly because it is such an obvious physical manifestation of us versus them. Masks now symbolize political identity. Wearing or not wearing masks is a marker of tribal identity. Remember Dr. Seuss’s Sneetches, who spent all of their money putting on and taking off stars from their bellies so that they could assert their group’s identity? Like Sneetches, we all become invested in the markers of our tribe. Being forced to violate the tribal codes is infuriating.

I was talking about anger with my friend and psychiatrist colleague, part-time Aquinnah resident Olga Glazer, and she pointed out that anger in a kind of

tribalistic battle can create a sense of satisfaction: You see the others as the perpetrators of ill and your group as the righteous victims. As Olga says, “The victim is never wrong, they are always innocent. You give yourself the message that you are superior.”

In his article, Peter Kramer mentions the pleasure of spats. What is it about fights and anger that is pleasurable? On reflecting on herself and her experience with patients, Olga Glazer observes that “anger is the fastest defense against depression. In depression you feel helpless ... in the state of anger you can do something, you feel an immediate high ... Anger is a decoy for anxiety, frustration, fear, hurt, guilt, worry, and embarrassment. These emotions feel negative, but when anger masks them, it feels empowering and can be such a relief.”

While expressions of anger and rage can feel good, the aftermath is usually not pretty. As Olga points out, anger is there to protect us from feeling vulnerable and helpless. The angry parts of our psyche are sometimes willing to do whatever it takes, regardless of the consequences, to protect the vulnerable parts of ourselves. But then there is a backlash. Shaming voices (both internal and external) might tell us that our angry behavior was childlike, destructive, and selfish, and that the rage we enjoyed in the moment should be bottled up and kept hidden.

When on horseback, I could justify my anger: I was protecting the horse; I was encouraging civilized driving; and didn't the driver, by going too fast, deserve my anger? For a while, I was shielded from shame by the anonymity of the interaction. Thinking about it later, I regretted my outburst, because I believe that everyone deserves to be treated respectfully, even if we don't like what they're doing. My goal was and is to figure out what part of me felt so thrown off balance and distressed by the incident, and why.

My job as a psychotherapist is to give my clients a safe place where they can express anger without feeling shamed. After all, that angry part of our personalities is actually well-intentioned, and trying to make the world a better place. Appreciating that makes it easier for the anger to soften, leaving room to explore and help the parts of ourselves that underlie our anger — the parts that feel vulnerable, hurt, and afraid. This kind of exploration is a key to healing. When anger is left unexamined, and perhaps is fueled by fear and national tribalism, our inner wounds fester, pain turns to rage, and healing is blocked.

A young woman in her early 20s — one of a whole generation whose lives have been derailed by the pandemic just as they were becoming independent adults —

told me recently that her sense of helplessness and despair shifted after the death of George Floyd. Rather than feeling powerless and trapped, she felt angry. The protests were the antidote. They gave her a sense of direction and action. The anger felt just and energizing, a source of pride rather than shame.

This gave me some insight into the ever-increasing polarization of people on different sides of the political divide in our country. Whether one is angry at the looters who want to tear down our national monuments and eliminate the police, or outraged over racism, economic disparity, and xenophobic hatred, righteous rage against the perpetrators can feel comforting, at least in the short term. But when there is no healing, and the causes of anger persist and grow, anger can become malignant and infectious, spreading with the virulence of a disease. Thus it feels at the moment that not only are we dealing with a pandemic of viral infection, we are dealing with a pandemic of unhappiness, fear, and anger.

These are tough times filled with uncertainty. Uncertainty is an unsettling state of mind, leading us to imagine the worst possible outcomes and to feelings of helplessness. As Peter Kramer points out, friendships and human connection buffer the stress of these times. It has been suggested that we stop using the term “social distancing” and replace it with “physical distancing.” During these uniquely distressing times, we need social connection and compassion for ourselves and others more than ever. Perhaps that connection and love needs to start with ourselves. It is natural to experience despair, anxiety, and anger as we grieve for a world that felt more certain and safe. Human connection, love, and acceptance of ourselves and others is the antidote.

* Although the research on other aspects of the pandemic has at times been confusing and even contradictory, masks’ protective benefits have been clearly established.

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