

Being Angry Means Being Alive

Young people need their anger to survive

Donny is crippled with anxiety. Pale and thin, he can hardly talk. His parents say it's been getting worse and now it's a struggle even to get him to go to school. They want to know how to help the son they love.

The lives of so many young people become stuck when their relationship with anger becomes stuck. Unable to express anger effectively, they numb themselves off from life. They become silent. They retreat to their rooms. They cut themselves. They stop eating. They wonder about suicide as a way of expressing what is, in effect, unexpressed anger.

They need their anger. There may be all sorts of other things going on in Donny's life, but I wonder what messages he's received in the past about anger? What's happened to the angry part of him? The part that once emerged into the world, screaming to be heard, screaming to survive? Over the years, how have the important people in his life reacted to his anger? Have they seen it as bad, shameful, sinful, threatening? Or have they understood it as healthy, vital, creative, passionate? As a sign of how much he cares? Over the years, how have his parents expressed (or not expressed) their own anger?

I'm not condoning violence or suggesting that young people should go around taking their anger out on other people, making other people's lives a misery. But we only learn to regulate our anger when it's listened to and taken seriously by other people. Then, as we become more confident that it *will* be listened to and *will* be taken seriously, we learn that we can afford to wait rather than explode, telling our anger to other people rather than enacting it.

Being angry means being alive. Without anger, we lose our creativity, determination, resilience, energy. Without it, we become depressed.

With Donny I try to find a spark, a moment of passion or spontaneity that we can build on. I try to find out what happened to his anger when he was younger, how he came to lose his voice. I ask what he sometimes *feels like* saying back to the people who silenced him then and who silence him now.

With girls who've typically been angry but who've found themselves crying and then not being taken seriously as a result, I've arranged two chairs in the room, one on either side of the girl's chair. I've explained that one is the 'sad' chair and the other the 'angry' chair. I've insisted that, from now on, the girl sits in and speaks from the 'sad' chair whenever she's sad (or crying), and sits in and speaks from the 'angry' chair whenever she's angry. "Try not to muddle them up!" I tell her.

Andrea starts telling me an angry story about her father's behaviour and, almost inevitably, starts crying. She moves to the sad chair.

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I ask, "Are you sad or are you angry?"

"Angry," she says, weeping. "Really angry."

"So stop crying and sit in the angry chair, not the sad chair."

She does this, wiping away her tears and continuing her story without tears subverting her anger, without them taking away the emphasis of what she's needing to say.

I ask how it feels, sitting in the 'angry' chair.

"All right," she replies. "In fact, good! I could get used to this!"

She looks me in the eye and continues her story, alive and convincing.