

THE
ENIGMA
OF
ANGER



ESSAYS ON A
SOMETIMES DEADLY SIN

Garret Keizer

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THE ENIGMA OF ANGER

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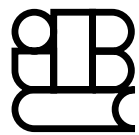
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For Kathy & Sarah



PREFACE

The aims of this book are perhaps as difficult to reconcile as are the kindest of our motives with the most volatile of our emotions. Putting the best face on things, one might say this is a very human book.

First of all, I wanted to write about anger in a way that would be genuinely helpful without resorting to the glibness of the self-help movement. In other words, I wanted to eschew solutions but not to eschew hope. I also wanted to face what was ugliest about human history and about myself without resorting to the creation of further ugliness.

Finally, I wanted to find common ground with my reader through the only means I know for finding common ground, which is to dig as deeply as possible into the ground of one's own particularity, which often includes one's peculiarity too. This meant that I was often writing as a man, a resident of a small town, and a Christian, though I never felt as though I were writing exclusively for men in churches in small towns. The approach may strike some as restrictive, but to my mind there is nothing more restrictive than trying to speak for everyone. The best we can do is to speak as one person among many, and hope that many—or at least a handful—will find some good use for what we say. That's what I tried to do.

I had help. I want to thank Sheryl Fullerton, my editor; Peter Matson, my agent; Jill Chaffee, my typist; James Doyle, my friend; Kathy Keizer, my dearest partner in everything;

also Lisa VonKann and the staff of the St. Johnsbury Athenaeum; and, finally, every person alive or dead who made me angry enough to write this book.

Garret Keizer
Sutton, Vermont
May 2002

THE ENIGMA
OF ANGER

And when he had made a scourge of small cords, he drove them all out of the temple, and the sheep, and the oxen; and poured out the changers' money, and overthrew the tables; and said unto them that sold doves, take these things hence; make not my Father's house an house of merchandise. And his disciples remembered that it was written, The zeal of thine house hath eaten me up.

John 2:15-17

A covetous person who is now truly converted to God, he will exercise a spiritual covetousness still. . . . So will a voluptuous man who is turned to God find plenty and deliciousness enough in him to feed his soul. . . . And so an angry and passionate man will find zeal enough in the House of God to eat him up.

John Donne

ANGER
IN THE
LORD



“Be not too hasty,” said Imlac, “to trust, or to admire, the teachers of morality: they discourse like angels, but they live like men.”

Samuel Johnson, *Rasselas*



WHERE I COME FROM

Only three limbs of a sugar maple tree, none thicker than my arm but each broad enough to shade a horse, lay in a sprinkling of sawdust by the side of the road. On the trunk above them, three pathetic stumps oozed sap. This was my tree, one of the beautiful ancient maples that line our rural Vermont property where it meets the road. Those trees had caught our eye even before my wife and I had seen the “For Sale” sign on what is now our home. I love to walk past those maples on afternoons when I finish work, and evenings before turning again to more work; I had especially longed to do so on that cloudy June day before unbuckling a briefcase full of final exams that would keep me up for much of the night. Mine was a smug little joy, I realized even then, as much the pride of ownership as the appreciation of nature, but I didn’t care. We want our joys to be harmless; we don’t

need them to be noble. But now even that small joy was cut short by the sight of those sawn-off limbs, enigmatic and almost insulting at my feet.

The town road crew had cut them off the tree; I was sure of that. The men had been grading that section of road in the afternoon just before I came home. I was less sure as to why they had cut them. The limbs had not hung out over the road. They had not been near any telephone or power lines. They had not been rotten or in danger of falling off. The only plausible reason I could imagine was that the road crew had cut off the limbs to make it easier to turn the grader, though there was an access to a hay field where they might have done the same thing less than a hundred feet away. Could they really have been so lazy?

But then, there didn't have to be a plausible reason, did there? Maybe one of the men had just felt like sawing off a few limbs—no different, really, from a kid in my classroom feeling in the mood to toss a crumpled wad of paper over my shoulder and into the trash can or to stick out his foot when another student walked by—except that no kid in my classroom would dare do such a thing. Well, some of the men around here (I muttered to myself) believe that nothing grows out of the earth or slips through a birth canal for any purpose better than to be cut down or shot. Today the limbs, tomorrow the whole damn tree, what the heck. If there's dynamite available, so much the better. And I did not think it irrational to suppose that there was a message intended by the gratuitous sawing off of those limbs, something like the message I'd found soaped on my car windows on the first Halloween after we'd moved in: "Fuck you" plus "Ain't Vermont great?"—a message to the flatlanders lest they get too

cozy in their precious little farmhouse and forget who was really in charge around here. We had scarcely lived in town long enough to strike up a conversation, let alone to make an enemy.

That was going to change. Tomorrow morning at 7:00, or whenever the town garage opened, I was going to deliver a little message of my own, which is that if you want to touch something that belongs to me, you'd better talk to me first or be prepared to talk to me afterward; and talking to me afterward, as I was fully prepared to demonstrate, is never a good way to start your day. And nobody had better give me any regulatory drivel about "right of way" either; you want to pull out your little rule books, I might show you a few rules you never heard of. Three healthy limbs sawn off a tree—*for absolutely no reason*. And I knew how this stuff worked—you don't teach school without learning how these things work: It's a matter of incremental aggression, beginning with something so deliberately small that you'll look like a fool if you complain and ending with something so outrageously nasty that you'll feel like a fool that you didn't. So much for that bit about choosing your battles. The battle I choose is every single battle that chooses me, and I fight to win every last one. Go on, tell me it's only three limbs off a tree. I want somebody to tell me it's only three limbs off a tree. How about if I break only three limbs on an idiot? God, was I mad!

God . . . was I mad?



I am a descendant of angry men. My father had a temper. I used to help him work on his cars, and it was rare that we could finish a job without at least one minor flare-up. It was

just as rare that we closed the hood with hard feelings. My father once confided to my mother, who wisely shared his confidence with me: “Gary could tell me to go screw myself, but I would still know he loved me.” It was the truth. It had been the truth for men in our family before either of us was born.

My great-grandfather, a Dutch Reformed minister, is said to have cursed his Heavenly Father following the deaths of his wife and two young daughters from tuberculosis. He is also said to have refused to sign a doctrinal confession affirming the damnation of all heathen souls. Though after long wanderings he returned to the pulpit (first crossing the Atlantic to the United States) and though it’s doubtful he ever lost his faith (one doesn’t curse what one doesn’t believe to exist), the image of his clenched fist shaken in the face of heaven, and perhaps in the faces of his seminary too, has long been with me.

So have the stories of his son, my grandfather and namesake, another angry ancestor I never knew. One day he came home from work to discover that a neighbor had conveniently emptied the contents of his cesspool next to the sand pile where his son and daughter played across the street. My grandfather threatened to hoist the neighbor up by his ankles if every trace of filth was not removed within twenty-four hours. “And when you’re finished, you cheap Holland bastard,” roared the minister’s son, “you get on your knees and pray.”

The phrase “Dutch temper” and the phrase “cheap Holland bastard”—uttered by a Hollander no less—are two signifiers of my heritage, a patrimony passed with fiery love from father to son. They are not the only signifiers, however. Life would be too easy if they were. My first reading of the Gospels was from a New Testament presented by my great-grandfather to my father when my parents were first married. That too was part

of the same heritage, and it ensured that my Dutch temper could seldom exist without Christian remorse, nor Christian meekness without some inner resistance. The story of my journey in faith has often amounted to the story of my struggle with anger. This book is a reflection based on those two stories.



I am writing about anger for at least three specific reasons. All of them are vividly personal, though I trust that they are no less common than anger itself.

1. My anger has often seemed out of proportion—that is, too great or too little, but more often too great—for the occasion that gave rise to it.
2. My anger has more often distressed those I love and who love me than it has afflicted those at whom I was angry.
3. My anger has not carried me far enough toward changing what legitimately enrages me. In fact, the anger often saps the conviction.

It's fair to say that I am writing not only *about* anger, but also *in* anger. In other words, anger is in some ways my inspiration as well as my subject. I can give three reasons for that as well.

First, I have grown increasingly impatient with the blithe reductionism of the so-called self-help movement. I have grown impatient at seeing the laudable idea that life is a series of struggles to be undertaken—or questions to be asked, or burdens to be borne—replaced with the idea that life is essentially a set

of problems to be solved by the adoption of the right program (spiritual or electronic) or the purchase of the right product (pharmaceutical or electronic).

I have also grown increasingly angry at our full-bellied acquiescence to social and economic injustice. I'm referring to the notion that everything other than the perfectible self is too vast and complex to admit to any remedy whatsoever, and that our best course of (in)action lies in ironical detachment or in the cultivation of an abrasive attitude that delivers some of the release, but packs none of the punch, of well-aimed rage. Our advertising and even our arts convey the idea that we as a society are brash, irreverent, and free of all constraint, when the best available evidence would suggest that we are in fact tame, spayed, and easily brought to heel.

And finally, I am writing in petulant resistance to the idea that anger is an emotion with no rightful place in the life of a Christian or in the emotional repertoire of any evolved human being. Darwinian evolution I can buy; most of the other forms, however, I can neither buy nor stomach. Darwin saw us linked with the animals, and therefore to the material creation as a whole; so do the Old and New Testaments. But the popular theology (most of it Gnostic) that portrays perfection as the shedding of every primitive instinct, and portrays God as an impersonal sanitizing spirit, is to my mind evidence of a satanic spirit. The Lord my God is a jealous God and an angry God, as well as a loving God and a merciful God. I am unable to imagine one without the other. I am unable to commit to any messiah who doesn't knock over tables.

A few years ago I told a dear friend of mine that I was going to write a book someday for angry men and women. "I think there need to be more of them," he quipped. I'm

inclined to agree. But if he's right, if more of us need to be angry, then it follows that we shall require a more careful application of anger and a finer discernment of when anger applies. That is the challenge of this book and one of the main challenges of the man who presumes to write it.



I never did go to the town garage the morning after I found those three severed tree limbs. That night as I sat at the kitchen table correcting final exams, I began to hear a noise “as of a rushing wind” but of such an immediate and dreadful intensity that I could not at first be certain it was the wind. I remember fixing my eyes on one of the dark windowpanes, which seemed about to shatter at any second, and thinking that the force outside could not possibly increase. It increased. I did not think I was dying, but the unreal sensation of those moments must be what it is like suddenly to realize that you are about to die. The rain was falling too hard. The next crack of thunder might be louder than we could bear. The lights snapped off. The roof sounded as though it were being ripped from the house.

I rushed my wife and our year-old daughter into the basement and then foolishly went upstairs to see what was happening and what I could do, which of course was nothing. Within a few minutes, the worst of the storm had passed. The rain subsided enough for me to see through the windows. One of the maple trees in our yard was snapped in two. Moving to the front windows, I saw to my horror that half the roof of our large barn across the road was gone, rafters and steel together.

For the next three days we were without electric power. Two-hundred-year-old maple trees and limbs the size of telephone poles lay across the road for more than a mile. The central path of the storm—and there is still disagreement more than a decade later as to whether it was a small tornado or simply a thunderstorm with a terrific downdraft—crossed the road about a quarter mile from our house and cut a swath of toppled trees and peeled roofs that extended through an entire county and beyond. In spite of the commotion we had heard, our house roof was spared. But twenty-foot-square sections of steel and beam from the barn lay hundreds of yards behind our house in a hay field. They had been torn from the barn and blown over the house. They might just as easily have been blown through it.

How puny my three limbs seemed in comparison to such carnage. And how puny my anger seemed in comparison to such fury. It was difficult for me not to think of them as related in some way, as temptation and warning, as sin and punishment, even as the psychological cause of a meteorological effect. Or as I've since come to think of them, as a man's paltry anger defused by God's tremendous mercy.

I took my chain saw out to the road and began to cut one of the massive limbs that lay across it. One of the road crew drove up, rolled down his window, and thanked me for saving him some work. Had he gotten out of his car, I would have thrown my arms around him.

8

For the Lord thy God is a consuming fire.

Deuteronomy



THE WRATH OF GOD

I wonder when I first became aware of anger. Was it as my own reaction or as someone else's that I first knew what it meant to be upset, a word we use for our emotions and also for objects turned over, knocked off their feet.

I can imagine either possibility. I can imagine that I first knew anger as my own inborn emotion. Before anyone allowed himself to be angry in my infant presence, I would have experienced some frustration that led to rage. Don't we sometimes see the spectacle of a baby with his face purple from bawling, his back stiffened, his clenched fists beating the air and say, "Oh, he's mad now!" But is he? Is the baby feeling what I know as anger, or is he merely feeling an extreme form of distress, of enormous helpless need? This may indeed be anger, but only in an embryonic form.

However congenital our capacities for rage, I'm inclined to think that we learn to be angry, and that this learning comes along with other things we learn: with skills, strengths, and possibilities. We could take a step further and say that the fullest experience of anger is not even possible apart from a knowledge of skills, strengths, and possibilities. We may liken an adult's temper tantrum to that of "a big baby," but even a very big baby does not yet know what it truly means to be angry. I say this because I define *anger* as an emotion of extreme frustration (something a baby knows) poised at the possibility of action (something a baby cannot know, or cannot fully know). If we think of our emotions as having purposes—that is, if we think of them as having been created or as having evolved for a reason—might the purpose of anger be to enable us to break loose, to struggle free, and at the most basic level to survive?

I can picture one of our ancestors fighting some ferocious beast, with much at stake, her own life not least of all, and though she is fully conscious of what might be gained or lost, and conscious too of her wounds bleeding and even of her own adrenaline rushing, she is not yet angry. She has not yet attained to the inspiration that our language figuratively describes as being "mad," that is, out of one's everyday mind. But then something changes; suddenly she is no longer locked in a mortal struggle—she has broken the lock. She has reached some place where her own survival and that of her children may mean less to her than giving full vent to the force now welling up inside. And even when the beast is dead under her feet, she continues to strike against its bloody carcass. Her rage is a form of glory, like that of a conductor at the crescendo, whose wand may be little more than the most