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REFLECTIONS ON ANGER

Women and Men in a Changing Society

Christa Reiser

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REFLECTIONS ON ANGER

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*Women and Men
in a Changing Society*

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Preface

When I told people that I was writing a book on men, women, and anger, almost without exception the response was, “That sounds interesting!” The next most common reply—typically from a woman—was along the lines of, “You got a few hours? I could tell you some things!” I suppose this topic seems so interesting because it deals with an area of our lives that we rarely talk about openly. Anger, in both ourselves and others, is at once familiar and alien. Although part of ourselves and our lives, it is rarely closely examined because it makes us uncomfortable, and most of us do our best to get it behind us. This is an emotion that catches us off-guard. The power punch of anger and its potential or actual loss of control make it hard to tarry in its wake.

We may fear anger because we don’t understand it. The unrestrained anger hurled at us by a loved person in our life may gouge out small and large chunks of security and trust until we are no longer whole, but we are not sure what to do in response. Although a family may be ravaged by this angry person—as many of those I interviewed testified—this anger does not tend to become a topic for discussion. This silence makes it impossible to understand anger and easy to fear it. Such a situation gives anger more power than it deserves. At its best, anger should simply be a warning, a signal of something gone wrong. We ought to be able to rally as a family or as an individual and ask the angry person, “What is it that is hurting you, threatening you, troubling you?” What can we do to identify and cast out the demons—the fears, disappointments, injustices, worries—that are behind the shouted words, the raised hand, the sarcastic tone, the hurled plate?

By and large the individuals I talked with had no real sense of the origins of anger in their parents. A person would simply state, “My father was an angry man.” It was a given, the way it was, regardless of how much damage and hurt derived from the expression of that anger. No one approached and asked the angry person to explain his or her actions. It is easy to understand why people do

not do this. We are extremely uneasy with someone who uses anger as a weapon. Also, we are not typically close to such a person; mostly we are tense and afraid. However, our lack of action also reflects our misunderstanding of what anger means. We don't think of it as a warning signal (except for us to take cover) but as an expression of personality. This makes it seem like an unchangeable situation. We don't see the angry person so much as a person in trouble as someone who is powerful and scary. Another unhelpful notion is the belief that when someone is angry, we must have done something to deserve it. This interpretation makes it much more likely that we will be searching and defending our own souls rather than trying to figure out what has gone wrong with the angry person or the situation he or she is in.

It is my sincere hope that this book helps to debunk some of these harmful beliefs. Anger fascinates because it is dangerous, unstable, and misunderstood. Reading about anger and talking to the women and men who allowed me to interview them, as well as others, have increased my understanding of this difficult emotion. I hope this book will do so for you.

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My partner in life and love, Kenneth Ray Wilson, who more than anyone else witnessed the excitement as well as the struggle and frustration over the birth of this book and did so with unfailing patience, support, and encouragement. In our journey together we continue to grow in our capacity to deal constructively with conflict and anger.

My beloved son, Devin, for understanding my need for time and space to work on this book; who tolerated varying states of tension and lack of attention with considerable maturity and good humor; and whose teenage ways provided me with more than one opportunity to practice anger control. It is my fervent hope that he will use anger as a source of insight and empathy rather than a weapon of destruction and pain.

All the members of my family, especially my parents, Hildegard and Sheldon Reiser, my parents-in-law, Susan and Eugene Wilson, and my brother Joe and my sister-in-law Janice, whose faith in me and support of my endeavors is much appreciated.

Snow, Jake, Teaser, Zowie, Fuzzball, and Sassy—my four-legged friends who provided much needed tension relief with their wagging tails, joyous purring, and silly antics.

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The many colleagues and friends whose interest and encouragement were helpful in keeping me on track.

My editor, Lynn Taylor, who believed in this project and consistently provided guidance and support and a little leeway when needed.

All the members of the production staff, especially Elizabeth Meagher, who guided the book through its final stages in a most helpful manner.

Part I

Anger: Contextual Issues

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Chapter 1

Between Havoc and Hope

We live in a time when tensions between many groups of people crackle across the screens of our everyday lives. We have grown accustomed to this static, and usually manage to ignore the clashes between Serb and Croat, Muslim and Hindu, skinhead and immigrant, black and white.

Another, quieter struggle is going on as well, however. And although it is typically not fought with guns or lawsuits, the tensions run deep, the stakes are high, and there is no place to hide. Women and men across the country, and indeed around the world, are confronting each other as they redefine the divisions of labor and love.

Our culture has depicted men and women as adversaries for many years, as expressed in the old phrase “the battle of the sexes.” Although this “war” has been raging for centuries, it has taken on new meanings in our time. Relationships between women and men are undergoing a major redefinition as the ground rules for this old battle change and as our culture shifts toward greater intimacy and equality (Stover and Hope 1993). As tradition collides with present-day views, the resulting conflict manifests itself in gender-based tension, anger, hostility, and sometimes aggression.

Although problems between the sexes have always been part of the human condition, the form, severity, and sources of these problems change constantly. The situation between men and women today is different from that of the past because for the first time, at least in Western history, women have come close to achieving equality with men. For the first time, substantial numbers of women and men support the ideal of equality between the sexes. For the first time, the majority of adult women are working outside the home and earning their own income, although most of them not at levels equal to men. For the first time, women have outvoted men at the polls. For the first time, an international women’s conference (held in Beijing in 1995) has openly challenged men’s right to use their physical power against women. Over time, many groups of

women have cried out for justice and equality, but never before have so many women been in a position of actual and potential power, and never before have feminist goals been shared so widely.

Such new social conditions and challenges to our patriarchal legacy have created havoc even while they have generated hope. The evidence is everywhere: newspapers, books, magazines, television programs, movies, music, talk shows, informal conversations, crime statistics, divorce statistics, rates of delayed marriage, cartoons, greeting cards, political debates, and classroom discussions. All of these commonly reflect some kind of trouble in male-female relationships. Popular television shows such as *Roseanne*, *Murphy Brown*, and *Home Improvement* explore the minefield of gender issues, primarily through sarcasm; rap songs by groups such as 2 Live Crew depict men's relations with women as violent, exploitative, and hostile; movies such as *Basic Instinct* and *War of the Roses* show that aggression and hostility are not limited to one gender.

In her book *Backlash*, Susan Faludi (1991) observes that in movies from the 1940s to the 1970s, men and women were portrayed as struggling with each other, but their intentions were good. The goal was to understand each other in the hope of bridging the gap between the sexes. An analysis of movies from the late 1980s, however, shows that men and women are no longer trying to figure things out. Often women are either omitted from these films altogether or are relegated to mute, incidental characters. Occasionally, too, a film such as *Thelma and Louise* portrays women as rebelling against the emotional and sexual demands imposed by men.

The Anita Hill–Clarence Thomas sexual harassment hearings, the incidents at the Tailhook convention, the “angry white men” challenging changes in the workplace, and the countless reports of battering and murdering of wives, girlfriends, and lovers (and sometimes husbands and boyfriends) drive home the point that tension and hostility are not limited to the world of make-believe. Faludi (1991) cites government statistics showing that sex-related murders increased 160 percent between 1976 and 1984. At least one-third of the women were killed by their husbands or boyfriends; the majority of that group were murdered shortly after declaring their independence by filing for divorce or leaving home.

Various polls reveal a widespread negative perception of the state of relations between the sexes. A recent nationwide random sample of 3,000 women found that women's attitudes toward men are becoming more critical. In 1970, for example, two-thirds of the women surveyed agreed that “most men are basically kind, gentle, and thoughtful.” In 1990, only half of the women surveyed agreed with this statement (Langer 1990). In 1970, 32 percent of the women believed that “most men are basically selfish and self-centered”; in 1990, 42 percent thought so. A poll by *Self* magazine (“He Vs She” 1992) found that 45 percent of single women and 35 percent of married women believed that relations between men and women are generally worse than they were ten years before. The 1993 Southern Focus Poll (Wiggins 1993) asked both southern and nonsouthern adults about relations between men and women,

and found that about half of each sample thought the situation between the sexes had grown worse in recent years. In a 1993 study of residents of eastern North Carolina, I found that 50 percent of the women and 43 percent of the men judged relations between women and men as worse today than ten years ago.

This tense state of affairs has been widely publicized. The topic has been headlined in recent issues of *Time*, *Gentleman's Quarterly*, and the *Utne Reader* with the assumption that things are getting worse, not better. An article in the *Utne Reader* asks, "Have you noticed that American men and women seem angrier at one another than ever? Belligerent superpowers have buried the hatchet, but the war between the sexes continues unabated" (Kipnis and Hingston 1993, 69). The authors point out that events such as the Anita Hill-Clarence Thomas controversy could have been used to promote productive dialogue between the sexes, but instead have "fueled male-female resentment." Instead of reconciliation, the result has been increasing polarization.

Many popular books deal with angry and hostile relations between women and men. *The Men We Never Knew*, *No Good Men*, *Men Who Hate Women and the Women Who Love Them*, *Opening Our Hearts to Men*, and *Successful Women, Angry Men* provide interesting and often valuable insights about the way women and men relate to each other, but most of these are not based on research.

Although the tension between women and men, often due to changing roles, is addressed commonly in popular sources, the research is sparse. Many academic books have been written on gender roles and on the problems of being a female or a male in today's changing world. We have carefully documented changes in women's (more so than men's) attitudes and behaviors over time; volumes have been written about differences and similarities between the sexes; many theories have been offered on the origin and perpetuation of gender inequality; various types of discrimination on several levels of analysis have been identified; our consciousness about sexual aggression has been raised; and we have pondered what the future will bring for the sexes. Few scholars, however, give systematic attention to the role of emotion, specifically anger, in male-female relationships.

Much writing, both popular and academic, focuses on the presumed consequences of anger or hostility, such as rape, murder, spouse abuse, and sexual harassment. Yet in contrast to the vast amount of material on aggressive behaviors, relatively little has been written on anger itself. Averill (1982) states in his book on anger that surveys dealing with ordinary, day-to-day anger can be counted on one hand. Although more research on anger has been done since he wrote this, there is much we don't know. Several recent books deal with anger and gender, but these focus on one sex or the other. Sandra Thomas's (1993) book, for example, is called *Women & Anger*. An earlier book by Anthony Astrachan (1986) is titled *How Men Feel*. Yvette Walczak (1988) has written *He and She, Men in the Eighties*. Some authors have explored strong negative feelings of hostility and hatred in works such as *My Enemy, My Love* by Judith Levine (1993) and *Misogynies* by Joan Smith (1992). Both of these books are from a woman's perspective.

Anger is an important emotion with enormous interpersonal consequences, both positive and negative. Sandra Thomas (1993) states that love and anger are the two most powerful emotions in America today. Increasingly, however, it seems that we are speaking the language of anger and aggression rather than the language of love. Anger must be studied in the context of gender relations so we can learn how to reduce it, manage it, and move forward to gender peace. We need to learn how much and what kind of anger has been generated by the tensions accompanying change in gender roles for both women and men, which issues are the most troublesome for both, how women and men deal with feelings and expressions of anger, and how their perceptions of each other contribute to the dynamics of anger.

This book explores the expression, extent, sources, and perceptions of anger in women's and men's lives as they cope with changing definitions of masculinity and femininity, maleness and femaleness, and structural changes in our society. The focus is on understanding what happens on an emotional level as women and men embark on new paths toward intimacy and fulfillment. It is important to study both women and men because their lives are increasingly intertwined. Each group's perceptions of themselves and of the other are crucial in advancing the cause of gender peace. In view of the dramatic changes in gender roles, the apparently high levels of tension and anger between women and men today, and the importance of anger in our lives, it is imperative to integrate the study of anger with the study of gender roles.

In-depth interviews with fifty individuals (twenty-five women and twenty-five men) form the basis of this book. As Averill (1982) advises, "Ultimately...questions regarding the nature and significance of anger must be addressed on the level of everyday experience" (157) because that is where anger has the greatest influence. Thus, to understand the dynamics of anger—meanings, expressions, and perceptions—it is imperative to listen to individuals' own descriptions.

The study of people's definitions and interpretations is critical for understanding human behavior (Shott 1979). It is essential to analyze the degree of fit between perception of self and perception of others. Our reality is ultimately defined by what we believe to be true. It could be, for example, that neither sex feels much anger toward the other, but that each thinks the other is angry toward their own sex. The consequences of this belief, even if it is false, are no less serious than if it is true.

This book is divided into two parts. The first part, chapters 1 through 4, provides a background for understanding anger; both in the context of gender relations and in a more general sense. The second part of the book, chapters 5 through 9, presents the content of the interviews and conclusions.

Chapter 2 assesses potential sources of conflict, tension, and anger on several levels of analysis. I conclude that social structure as well as interpersonal factors not only permit conflict in gender relations but sometimes encourage it. The third chapter provides background on anger; a brief history of the research on anger is followed by a discussion of the importance of anger in interpersonal relationships. In this chapter I also discuss conceptual and