The Anger Channel

Bomb the White House or buy yourself a dozen white roses. But do something

March 1, 1997 By Victoria A. Brownworth

The most famous lines from my favorite poem by Dylan Thomas read, “Do not go gentle into that good night/Rage, rage against the dying of the light.” These words, so powerful and incantatory, speak eloquently of the essential relationship between anger and death. And what response but rage could one have to being given a terminal diagnosis in the prime of life? Rage is the externalization of terror; in externalizing our fears through anger, we also project them. Anger becomes action. We must *do* something.

Diagnosis leads to realization: *I have been singled out for death.* There was a rage of realization in the early days of the epidemic. Rage that the death of hundreds, then thousands, were invisible because AIDS was a “gay” disease. Despised, gays and lesbians were told we deserved to die; this sickness was our sin, death our punishment. Anger became a route to survival.

Popular psychobabble tells us different things about the nature of anger. Some psychologists say anger is bad, toxic; others say anger is good, reparative. The truth is, anger is the most destructive force in the world today: It is the root of war, acts of terrorism and torture, all kinds of cruelty; it can wound, maim, kill. Yet anger can also be channeled for good; it needn’t be given free rein to dominate, individually or collectively. Anger can heal; it is the natural antidote to despair. Anger connects us with others, forges the deepest and most affirming links in our lives. Rather than holding us back, rage can propel us forward; it can be the impetus that makes us act rather than merely react. Of course, not everyone will take the same action: Some will choose to march on the White House, while others will decide to treat themselves to dinner at the most expensive restaurant in town. Anger keeps all in the moment.

A life-threatening diagnosis shocks the system. How many weeks after learning I had cancer did I stagger through my days and spiral through my nights in a haze of disbelief? And after realization set in, how much more time was wasted in a fury, lashing out in my rage that death could dare to touch me when I was still so young? There is a point at which, dying, one feels murderous. You are determined not to go alone; you want (however irrationally) to take others with you. Some people do. Some take charge of their pain by suicide or murder. Some buy guns or bomb buildings. Some let their anger push out every other emotion, ofrcing everyone away and so catalyzing their own worst fears of dying alone. Others focus the explosive nature of their rage to forge a tool for change.This was the path that opened for me, the only avenue that offered solace. Activism distills

and articulates anger while benefiting others. It fine-tunes rage, allows us to leave a legacy for our lovers, children, comrades, for everyone facing the same terrible diagnosis.

In activism we find pride where we have been told there is only shame. We reject blame for our disease, refuse to be told death is an acceptable punishment. We find role models for our anger, alternatives to the blinding suffocating fury at the inevitability of our fate. We focus our anger on the institutions that ignore our oppression, on the bigotry that allows our deaths.

In the days before I was too sick to participate in marches and demonstrations, I came away from those events stronger and healthier, infused with the spirit of all the disparate people united in the same struggle. We came together out of a common anger, but together we achieved empowerment, even joy. It is a paradox: Our rage bonds us, lovingly; our dying fuses us ever more strongly to the purposeful nature of living.

Anger is like dynamite: Dangerous in the wrong hands, fatal if used recklessly. You underestimate its power at your peril. But you can tap into your own abundant stores of this volatile tool and consider how best to use it. Again, not everyone chooses the same channel for anger. Direct action is too public, too “militant,” for many. Yet activism can be very personal, even private. It can be as simple as an identification with other PWAs, an acknowledgment that you too are a member of a greater community. Letter writers are no less firebrands than those lying in the streets at a die-in; the individual voice willing to speak of living with AIDS is as articulate as crowds shouting in front of the White House. Voicing our anger is risky, but joining our voice with others has caused an avalanche to change.

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