

The Alchemy of Anger

by Sharon Martin

Why does anger make us so uncomfortable? Recently a young man asked me, “Is anger an important part of our psyches or do we want to get rid of it?” We are told that it is a normal emotion, but most of us find it exceedingly unpleasant and hard to manage. But does it have a constructive purpose? I believe the answer is a resounding yes.

Anger comes straight up from the unconscious, which means we cannot prevent it and we cannot, ultimately, control it. This is why we speak only of “anger management,” because we do not have power over it. In other words, this painful emotion is of God. Dr. Jung wrote these words two years before he died: “God” is the name by which I designate all things which cross my willful path violently and recklessly, all things which upset my subjective views, plans and intentions, and change the course of my life for better or for worse.” The Greek gods Dionysus and Ares are associated with anger and can be very dangerous and destructive. In the Dionysian rituals, people and animals were dismembered, torn apart, and devoured. And Ares, as we know, is the god of war. But as we will see, anger has an essential place in the psyche and a profound purpose in our development.

Anger corresponds to the alchemical stage *calcinatio* and the element associated with it is fire. *Calcinatio* images are of fire and heat, which are associated with erotic love, as well as the suffering connected with primitive anger, fury and frustration, which are usually triggered in love relationships. The *calcinatio* represents being burned up or consumed by the fires of one's unmet desires, blocked instincts, passions and rages, in other words, one's own personal hell. If this intense affect can be endured, it can have a refining and consolidating effect, for it is also associated with the flames of the funeral pyre, which signify transformation.

In this psychic space the issue is not so much to “get the anger out” as it is to learn to trust oneself enough to be able to *contain* such powerful feelings. In rage lie the seeds of considerable strength of will and survival capacity. This rage is almost always relegated to the unconscious in childhood, so as not to displease the person who has evoked it by their failure to meet our needs, and thereby to lose what little we may have. If it is not brought to consciousness, experienced and resolved, it cannot do its work, which is usually to separate one from the parents. And by separate I do not mean to move out of the parent's house. I mean to grow up and live one's own life, not controlled by the parental complex. Beware! This is not as easy as it sounds! We may think we have grown up, but we are, most of us, living out of the wounds our parents gave us in



William Blake, Rintrah - the personification of just wrath

ways we do not know about. There is an unconscious dimension to the mother and father which affects us far more powerfully than we can imagine. It is the work of analysis, dream work and psychotherapy to smoke this out.

The fire of the *calcinatio* is associated with purification and transformation. Hell fire is the punishment applied to those who are condemned at the “Last Judgment.” This is that aspect of the ego that is inflated, or over-identified with the Self, and uses the Self for personal pleasure or power. This is the aspect that has the fantasy of having everything we want: money, happiness, the perfect mate who meets all our needs. It is the “little king,” or the frustrated infant in us who wants what it wants and fully expects to get it (we sometimes call this “a sense of entitlement”). There is nothing wrong with this fantasy in and of itself, because it is essentially a longing for a state of complete harmony with the Self. But if we have the childish demand that someone in the outer world must provide it, then of course that is impossible. The difficulty is to save this fantasy which brings life and to cut away the childish expectation. If the associated frustration can be consciously suffered, it is the agent that can burn away the childish innocence with its primitive desire and lead us to our Selves.

Stanton Marlon, in his book *The Black Sun*, comments on this: In Alchemy this innocence, which they called virgin's milk, was seen as a primary condition, something without Earth and which must be, in alchemical terms, blackened. Typical virgin milk fantasies are often maintained emotionally in otherwise

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intellectually sophisticated and developed people. Unconsciously held ideas might include sentiments such as “Life should be fair,” “Why is this happening to me?” or “If I am good, God will bless/protect/take care of me and be my perfect parent,” or “Bad things won't happen to me since I eat right/exercise/am a good person.” We could also call this “magical thinking.” When life does not affirm these illusions, the innocent ego can be overwhelmed with feelings of oppression, victimization, hurt, and self-pity and look frantically for what went wrong.

Looking for what went wrong is often looking in the wrong place. What is not seen by the wounded ego is that what is happening under the surface and in the fire is a dying of immature innocence—a blackening that holds a transformative possibility.

In the Bible we find reference to this concept: “See, I have refined you, though not as silver; I have tested you in the furnace of affliction.”

One of the most fertile grounds for *calcinatio* is that of frustrated love. This experience burns away a great deal of dross if we can relate to it with some consciousness. When a person cannot have the object of his or her desire, there is usually great anger, and some outer circumstance or the other person is blamed for it. Or maybe there is also an utterly dejected, self-pitying kind of response (let's face it, we've all been here). But if by some miracle, our response contains a mustard seed of recognition of the creative potential in the situation, then one can experience the frustration and rage without too much blame until something begins to transform within. Passion is a very great catalyst, perhaps the greatest we have, and frustration of passion is central to the *calcinatio*. If one can stay with the experience, it can become one of the greatest shapers of a solid sense of personal identity. The person who has never experienced this frustration, or has experienced it but interpreted it as someone's fault (our own or another's) can never grow beyond the lion and the wolf, who in alchemy stand for primitive instinctual desire. There will remain a basic uncompromising greed and destructiveness which festers in the unconscious, and is almost always out of reach of one's awareness.

Simply put, *calcinatio* is a process that dries out water-logged complexes. When a complex is water-logged it means that it is contaminated with unconscious contents. This often shows itself in dreams in images of water coming up through the floor of the house, threatening to undermine the foundation, or seeping through the walls or ceiling. Without the fire of emotional intensity the drying out process cannot happen. This affect is in the complex itself and becomes operative as it makes itself known through dreams or in feelings that arise in events or relationships in waking life. All of the thoughts, feelings and memories that carry anger, shame, rage or hatred must be consciously experienced and given full expression *until they burn themselves out*. This often takes much longer than we would like, but in this way the fire can burn through the unconscious contamination and burn up the old, unhealthy connections we may have with people. The complex is then transformed and something new can arise, phoenix-like, from the ashes.

Fire has long been perceived as a connecting link between the human and divine realms, which is why it

was the primary method of sacrifice to the gods. That which is sacrificed by burning is quite literally “made sacred” since that which is burned turns mostly to smoke and ascends to the heavens.

We see another aspect of fire in the myth of Demeter, who in her grief after the abduction of Persephone accepts the hospitality of the king and queen of Eleusis. She attempts to immortalize their child by holding him in the fire. Thus the psychological meaning of the fire bath is that it connects us to our divinity or immortality.

In the story of Nebuchadnezzar and the fiery furnace, the fire represents the king's rage. The king is the ruling principle of consciousness, or the ego. It is in the fiery furnace that the three (Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego) encounter Christ, or the divine Self. Here we can again see that the rage of the frustrated ego, if endured, can connect us with the Self. This is a typical motif in shamanism and other healing arts, in which the holy man or woman is unharmed by walking on hot coals, swallowing fire or being immersed in it.

The purpose of anger, symbolized by fire, is transformation, which finally brings about a certain immunity to affect and an ability to see the archetypal aspect of our existence. Otherwise we are controlled, governed, or possessed by our desires. When *calcinatio* is complete, our anger does not take possession, and we are not carried away or identified with it. This does not mean that we no longer experience anger or other dark, intense feelings. On the contrary, Dr. Jung says, regarding the *calcinatio*, or the burning of desirousness “...even though you may be having a bad time inside, because when your devil has a bad time you have a bad time...of course he will rumble around in your entrails. But after a while you will see that it was right (to endure) ...you will slowly become quiet and change. Then you will discern that there is a stone growing...and insofar as self-control, or non-indulgence, has become a habit, it is a stone...when that attitude becomes a *fait accompli*, the stone will be a diamond.”



M. Maier, Atalanta fugiens, 1618