



COUNTERPOINT by Esther Mürer

Reflections on Anger

Hurt at Friends' failure to perceive our art as a valid form of service or witness is widespread among us. What kind of support we can legitimately ask from our meetings is a question leading into deep spiritual waters. For openness I feel led to share the following, adapted from a piece I wrote for the Central Philadelphia MM newsletter.

The creedless nature of liberal Quakerism inevitably carries with it the dangers of Ranterism—the tendency to interpret any impulse coming from within as being Spirit-led.

A religion based on premises that are both unstated and unexamined invites me to project my own content on it, so that the "community" becomes an extension of myself. When I can't see the boundary between me and not-me, discernment and accountability are impossible.

Is Ranterism more of a danger for artists than for others? Are we especially prone to conflate our inner vision and the community's unstated premises? I don't know, but the question is worth asking.

Certainly many of us are angry at our meetings, or with Friends. This anger often has a subtext which goes something like this: "You neither know nor care where I really live. As a member of this community I have a right to be understood!"

When I'm in this mood it generally turns out that what I crave is not help in growing into greater obedience to the leadings of the Spirit, but support for my rebellious self-will, my spiritual pride, my flight from the Hound of Heaven.

In learning to understand and deal with my own anger I have found the following quotations to be valuable touchstones. The first is from Paul:

Pain borne in God's way brings no regrets but a change of heart leading to salvation; pain borne in the world's way brings death. —2 Corinthians 7:10 (REB)

The Greek word rendered here as "pain" (many translations use "grief" or "sorrow") covers a wide spectrum of physical and mental anguish, from grief to resentment to outrage. Compare the use of the word *sore* in the second quote, which comes from the "step book" of Alcoholics Anonymous, *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*:

It is a spiritual axiom that every time we are disturbed, no matter what the cause, there is something wrong *with us*. If somebody hurts us and we are sore, we are in the wrong also.

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When I'm mired down in anger I need to ask myself wherein I am wrong, and what kind of change God may be asking of me.

I often discover that God is trying to tell me something I don't want to hear, and that I'm looking to the Meeting to shield me from having to hear it. I am trying to get the meeting to support a false self, to abet my resistance to God's will for my life. When that doesn't work, I blame the Meeting.

If, on the other hand, it does work--if I receive the support I'm asking for--that just makes things worse. The result is a sort of spiritual arms race in which my demands that the meeting shore up my defenses against God escalate in a vicious circle.

Closely related is the "Let's all get together and do my thing" ploy. I hear what I am being called to do, but I don't have the courage to do it alone and face the possible negative consequences. From the Meeting I don't just want clearness or encouragement or support; I want everybody else to hear my call as theirs, to rescue me from the consequences, *to bear my cross*. When this doesn't happen I start muttering things about a prophet being without honor in her own country.

In both these cases my anger may be justified, but it is misdirected. I should be mad at God, not the Meeting. God can make the most outrageous demands. If I take time to have it out with God, then I do undergo a change of heart; I see that I must stop grumbling and get on with minding my call. And, as George Fox would put it, "then content comes."

I bear pain in the world's way when I use my anger as an defense against hearing or minding my call. I bear pain in God's way when I mind my call and accept the cross involved.

Paul is right: on the all too rare occasions when I've managed to bear pain in God's way, I have never regretted it.

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