

BY GERI LARKIN

Turning Rage to Love

Anger over relationship breakups, betrayals or abandonment can serve as a wise teacher on the spiritual path

Relationship rage is at an all-time high. Maybe it's just that there are more of us on the planet. All I know is this: Rage is completely painful. Screaming, pushing, shoving, sulking, manipulating, emotional blackmailing, silent smoldering, watching for ways to get even. All rage. And uncontrollable: You never know where it will aim itself.

A week ago, a young woman, Elizabeth, asked to speak to me following a Sunday-morning meditation service. She was in tears. She wanted my advice about an incident that had happened to her during the week. She and her partner were driving down a street near her house when they suddenly noticed a couple having an argument. The man started beating the woman, really beating her. Liz wanted to stop to help, but her boyfriend said no—the guy could have a gun. What should she have done?

My reaction was immediate. Distract the man. Drive a little too close. Or honk and wave wildly. Or turn the music up to full volume. Shout something. Anything to distract him so she could get away. And call the police.

Relationship rage is everywhere. You know it. I know it. When we see it the easiest thing to do is ignore it. But it will only grow if we do. So the real question to ask ourselves is, How can I be helpful in this situation? Sometimes it's best to stay clear of the couple but call the police. Often it's helpful to act as a distraction. If your response stops someone from harming, you've just earned a Girl Scout stripe in [Buddhist] Tusita heaven.

ADMITTING OUR RAGE

Buddha's contemporary King Udena was married to

some feisty women. One of them, Magandiya, while graceful in figure, beautiful in appearance, and charming when she wanted to be, was also jealous and mean-spirited. When she didn't like another one of his wives, she went after her big time, using relationship rage as her weapon. Her main target was Samavati, the king's favorite consort. Magandiya constantly came up with schemes aimed at stirring the king's wrath toward her competition. Once, Magandiya put a snake into the king's favorite lute and covered the hole with a bunch of flowers. When he picked up the lute...out came the snake. When the king saw the snake, he was furious.

Deciding Magandiya was right, he finally lost it. The king commanded Samavati to stand in front of him with all of her ladies-in-waiting behind her. Then he put an arrow dipped in poison into his bow. And shot it.

Since this is an early Buddhist story, and there are miracles in early Buddhist stories, the queen didn't die. And since Samavati and her ladies bore no ill will against the king and

stood there filled with loving-kindness for him, the arrow missed them, even though the king was an excellent archer.

Would that we were all so lucky. We say to ourselves, "I would never get angry like that," but just watch what happens when someone cuts in front of us in a movie line or on a highway. Listen to the tone of our voices when we get yet another telemarketing phone call during dinner. It's in there. And these aren't even the intimate relationships in our lives, where we've given ourselves permission to openly emote.

Admitting that we have the capacity to rage opens the



door to learning how to be more Samavati. Since I know I can rage with the best of them, and I know the damage done by rage, I can admit that I need to train myself so I won't give in to it when a relationship goes sour. How? By paying attention to my own emotional patterns. When am I easily triggered? When I'm hungry? Tired? Too busy? It is embarrassingly easy to spot trigger points when we look. I, for one, need to stop difficult relationship discussions when I'm hungry or tired. Period. They'll only go downhill.

RAGE FROM HEARTBREAK

Sometimes relationship rage is simply our own heart breaking open. For this reason it is easier to rage than to weep at our loss. Except that fury cuts such wide swaths of negative karma, because it pulls other people into our melodrama. Innocents: monks, children, pets, neighbors, strangers. At the end of a relationship, when rage starts to erupt – and believe me, you'll feel it coming if you pay close attention to your body – our job is to shout to ourselves, "Stop!" Right then and there we need to ask ourselves what is really going on. In the quiet space right behind the question we'll hear the answer – that our heart has just been split open by a huge emotional loss. And it hurts. It really hurts.

This simple realization reminds us that our job is to heal our hearts, not harm other people. In that split second we can give ourselves permission to start the process of healing without wasting precious time doing anything else. We can promise ourselves quiet time. Take ourselves into the woods where nature can give us refuge and we can wail ourselves hoarse. We can buy ourselves flowers and list all the things we admire about ourselves, starting with "I have the courage to love someone with my whole heart." We can list the relationship danger signs we didn't see so we'll be more skillful next time. Or we can decide to simply move on. Movies with sad endings are great triggers for weeping because mostly that is what we need to do at first. We need to weep our eyes dry, without apology, because we're worth it. Before long our lives will be ready to start up again in a fresh and – dare I say it – happy way.

SEEING THE BIG PICTURE

I met my first real boyfriend at sixteen. Before that, dabbling: quick kisses to see if I could start and finish without getting my braces caught, quick kisses to see what someone else's mouth tasted like (french fries mostly). At sixteen, on a train to Sydney, Australia, to spend a day in Hyde Park, there he was – the sexiest, scruffiest, I-wouldn't-trade-two-Brad-Pitts-for-him, red-headed boy. Red – I named him instantly – caught me gaping at him,

baggie jeans, sandals, surfer-girl hair.

By the time the train pulled into Sydney he was sitting next to me and we were comparing notes on everything from the best secondhand stores to the cheapest fish-and-chip shops on the south shore. By the end of the day, I was writing his name inside hearts. By the end of week two, Red and I were inseparable. I learned how to kiss real kisses, and he cleaned our swimming pool in the backyard. We were a match made in heaven.

After three months together, I faced a tough school year, and he started looking for a real job, having completed technical school. We saw each other on weekends until, without warning, his phone calls stopped. I was sure he had died.

Hysterical, I went looking for the body. Taking a day off from school, I took the train into Sydney, where I found him at his desk – on the phone with another girl.

I was devastated. It had simply never occurred to me that our love would end, that our future wasn't sealed, that we weren't a match. His "I'm not good enough for you" fell on deaf, broken-hearted ears. I was sure I would die.

For months, I mourned the loss of Red. I waited for him to come to his senses, to show up on my doorstep begging forgiveness. I couldn't eat or sleep. And I was mean. I yelled at everything and everyone. I could have burned the house down, scratching curse words onto the car, filled the swimming pool with lizard bodies. Furious mean.

For six months, I growled and fumed. Finally, chocolate and sanity restored me. But not before I owed everyone I knew and at least a handful of complete strangers, huge apologies. After months of quiet contemplation, I was finally able to see a broader picture, that we were way too young, that he was right to tell me we weren't a long-term match. That my academic and athletic plates were-way too crowded for a full-time boyfriend. That's when the rage left. Two years later, I was in love again.

FROM A PLACE OF INDEPENDENCE

Looking back at the dozen or so times I've fallen in and out of love in this lifetime, I've realized how correct the ancient women were to live lives that were not defined by love relationships. How much their own perspective of what needed tending – families, yes, but also their spiritual work – saved them from being consumed by relationship rage when the hard times hit them between the eyes.

Romantic love comes and goes, like clouds. Knowing this has taught me the value of independence. And how unproductive and even silly relationship rage is, since it is, inevitably, based on our own false expectations of what a relationship will be or do

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Rage vs. Healthy Anger

Rage is different from healthy anger. In situations where we can stay clear about our experience, we confront what makes us angry and set boundaries. "When you show up two hours later than you say you will on Friday nights, I feel disrespected, and to protect myself I'll stop planning to see you on Fridays." This is anger. Plotting to hurt the person or something he or she owns? Rage.

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that could produce a new way of life. C—ourageously examine these new understandings, and if they align with our personal inner truth and knowing, to enlarge our belief system to include them. E—xpress our lives as a demonstration of our highest beliefs, rather than as a denial of them. The relevancy to Buddhists of these." Five Steps to Peace is self-apparent.

M: Many of us feel helpless in the face of possible war. Even if we believe in peace, or practice peace, we cannot change people who are beating war drums. How do we keep our courage?

NDW: Through non-attachment. By releasing ourselves from expectations and becoming unattached to results or outcomes. By knowing and understanding that the world is spinning perfectly in every single moment, and that our job is to see the perfection. By working towards a world of harmony and non-violence in our hearts and in the outer world that we ourselves touch, and by expanding the reach and the impact of our touch, if we choose, in order to touch all the world

M: You call yourself a "social activist for spiritual change." How do you do this in everyday life, like when you're going to "work," or talking with your children, or driving, or taking out the trash?

NDW: By making spiritual change produce change in the way that I do all those things that you mentioned. First, I do not go to "work." I go only to "joy." If a thing is work, I do not do it. I would rather let it go "undone" until I can see it as "joy." Buddha Nature sees joy in everything — even in pain. This, of course, makes the pain bearable. It can even transform the pain. It can actually make the experience of pain disappear.

M: Have you achieved nirvana (a permanent state of peace)?

NDW: No. But I have achieved bliss. I believe that bliss is a "temporary state of peace," as opposed to a "permanent" state of peace. I have achieved and experienced bliss many times in my life, and I achieve it more and more, and for longer and longer periods, everyday. I experience bliss through non-attachment. Through non-judgment. Through non-differentiation, through non-separation. I would call this the state of Godliness. It is what God is. Non-attached, non-judgmental, non-differentiated, non-separated. Buddhists would call this the Buddha Nature. I see no difference at all. I see, in fact, non-difference everywhere.

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for us.

Over and over, Buddha taught the value of perspective. He reminded his followers that energy needs to go into our spiritual awakening, our practice. If we don't know how much time we have left to fall into our own enlightenment — and we don't — how dare we spend hours, months or even years frivolously? Losing any of our precious life to relationship rage is a complete waste of time. As they began to understand impermanence and know the high costs of rage, Buddha's female disciples put the bulk of their energies into their own spiritual growth, their own enlightenment.

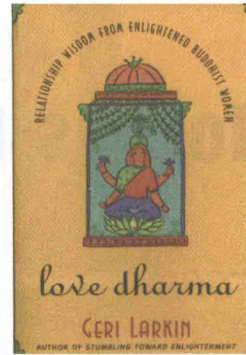
What wisdom. Here's a bonus: When you and I have the courage to put our own enlightenment first, all relationships are joy. Why? Because in good times and bad they are feeding us clues about the work we need to do. Here's where we might be stuck, where we blame our partner for all the wrongs of our lives. Here's where we are surprisingly and wonderfully kind and compassionate and forgiving, and where we know how to giggle and dance and learn a new theme song.

FORGIVENESS

Keeping a list of all the ways we've been wronged or hurt by our partner just makes us sick physically and emotionally. In 1999, the Templeton Foundation for Forgiveness Research in Richmond, Virginia, spent about \$6 million to study how forgiving someone and moving on with our lives affects us. What happens if we simply let go of our rage? Some of their findings are amazing. In one study more than 70 undergraduates at Hope College in Hope, Michigan, were instructed to cultivate vengeful thoughts for as little as sixteen seconds. The group experienced increased blood pressure, heart rate, and muscle tension. On the other hand, when they focused on forgiving, on just letting go, the stress indicators fell significantly.

WOMEN FRIENDS

What if you are just plain stuck in rage? If it has locked you into its seductive dance



of righteous energy? What then? Once skillful response is to seek refuge in the wisdom of other women. Ancient /Buddhist women used each other as protection against relationship rage. They used each other's patience, wisdom, and presence. When some of the women became known as Buddhist teachers, the other women were able to lean

hard on them for help. Women ministering to women.

Every woman I have ever known has analyzed and fretted over her relationships. This fretting and analyzing includes all the women ministers I know. Plus, we all have been in love at least once. So we understand, in our bones, what it feels like to be in love — sick love, healthy love, in-between love. We know what it is to lie awake wondering if he or she will call. Most women ministers I know have to live through falling out of love or being abandoned. When you talk to us and we nod, it is out of shared experience.

GRATITUDE

Finally, as crazy as this sounds, practicing gratitude can cut through relationship rage. I'm pretty skilled at getting angry. It happens fast, and it's hot. Almost always the anger comes from situations where someone has acted cruelly to another person. After thousands and thousands of hours of meditation and years of spiritual practice, I have finally figured out how to transform the rage. Beyond the witnessing of it, finding something to be grateful for — anything — cuts the rage. Gratitude that I'm alive, that spring always comes, that my behind hasn't sunk all the way to my knees, that my kids still love me. Gratitude keeps my emotions soft and opens a space to choose compassion. In that space, the wisdom that a specific situation needs can also surface.

Geri Larkin is the founder and guiding teacher of Still Point Zen Buddhist Temple in Detroit, Michigan. Her previous books include, "Stumbling Towards Enlightenment," and "First You Shave Your Head." This essay is adapted from, "Love Dharma: Relationship Wisdom from Enlightened Buddhist Women." ©2002 by Geri Larkin. Reprinted with the permission of Tuttle Publishing, www.tuttlepublishing.com.