Love and Anger: How to Talk Effectively About Controversial Topics

By Traci Ruble

Love has been on my mind. Not the kind that couples cling to around a warm fire, but the Lenny-Kravitz-love-ethic of letting love rule in our discourse around controversial topics such as racial justice, poverty, the environment and terrorism. I know that I, the woman who wrote an article titled “F*ck Positive Thinking” and a white woman of privilege, run the risk of sounding like a pollyanna contradiction or naive in my privilege, but hear me out.

When grounded in love, our anger and outrage over racism, poverty, environmental crises and terrorism can be better leveraged for stewarding justice and planetary health. Anger that is grounded in love helps us relate to one another, get our message across, remain open-hearted in our listening, and focus on community action that makes a lasting difference. Grounded love effectively uses our outrage to usher in bigger change. If we reactively attack each other and behave discompassionately towards one another when we are trying to heal traumatic, emotionally fraught and difficult problems in the world, we are destined to fail. I want us all to succeed and heal, don’t you?

What is stopping us (including me) from moving from love?

The crises in the world tax our nervous systems with too much electricity and cortisol, which move faster than a Jedi Fighter and cause us to react rather than “using the Force” to act with intention. When I was in graduate school, my fiery energy felt out of place among so many ethereal and meditative colleagues blissed out on love in my graduate program. They struck me as out-of-touch, bypassing all the many reasons we need to be outraged. I wanted to learn more about anger/rage, so I wrote my Master’s thesis on the topic.

I found James Averill, Professor of Psychology and emotion researcher from the University of Massachusetts Amherst, to have the broadest and most cross-culturally relevant definition of anger: ‘Beneath our need to act aggressively is pain or betrayal related to our biological, social or ecological well being’ (1994). Psychologist Daniel Goleman of Emotional Intelligence fame gives us a nervous system primer on what is happening in our physical body when we are experiencing anger not grounded in love:

> We are threatened physically or symbolically and our limbic system surges preparing us in milliseconds to fight, flight or flee. Sometimes this generalized excitation can last hours or days. What is more, every-day stressors can create this limbic system excitation. Add to it, if a person has a personal or generational history of trauma – they can carry forward this readiness to act impulsively. (Goleman,1995).

We have a lot we rightfully need to be outraged about in the world. But many of us are so stressed out by our everyday lives, our nervous systems are more ready to react than engage in a discourse that is grounded in love, and we aren’t helping our systems calm. We are underpaid, overworked, raising kids away from our extended families, and if we get sick we could go bankrupt. So when a controversial topic we care about comes up, we may be more inclined to act aggressively or disengage altogether. Add to it that many of us carry our own personal and generational histories of trauma with us into the present (sexual abuse, physical abuse, extreme neglect, poverty, racial abuse and the list goes on) making us not only more likely to act impulsively but sometimes acting in ways that make matters worse.

How do we all stay grounded in love?

Staying grounded in love is one part marinating in some form of loving kindness practice and three parts knowing more about our nervous systems and how
electricity speeds us up or slows us down to the point of reactivity or disengagement. For starters we could take a personal inventory and find out what personal stuff belies our unnecessary busyness. Overtaxing our nervous systems daily fatigues us and sours our approach to larger issues. Busyness to this extreme is the antithesis of a loving kindness practice. But cutting out the unnecessary busyness usually has so much personal self-worth and self-hate material in there that a stint in therapy is needed to bring this addiction to busyness into full view.

Second, engaging in active healing practices around any personal trauma is a prerequisite to intentional and grounded-in-love engagement around controversial topics. When the animosity-stained shadows of a traumatic past are cast on what is happening right here, right now, our appraisal of the situation has to be reconsidered and tested before we (re)act. Start with grounding a shaky nervous system and asking, “What is the truest truth right here right now and what am I adding from my past?” I see many a conversation go down in flames as people speak from a reactive trauma state, drowning in the past, rather than a grounded love ethic in the present. This is such hard but courageous work.

Trauma history or not, research shows nature has a positive impact on all of us. Even walking barefoot in grass or dirt near where you live soothes frayed nerves. The trick is getting out of doors every day and prioritizing caring for your nervous system. And all that mindfulness stuff so en vogue right now? Turns out finding ways to disconnect from that bouncing ball of a brain (there are several articles on Psyched Magazine that can help you learn more or check out my favorite book on mindfulness by ABC News Anchor, Dan Harris, 10% Happier) helps slow our agitated nervous systems down and ride the waves of stressful lives while being kind and intentional with ourselves and one another.

But what my research really illuminated was how our mindfulness practice has to welcome anger, too, if we want to use it effectively to face the tragedies we see everyday. John Welwood, John Masters and Michelle Rosaldo are transpersonal therapists who advocate for a mindfulness practice that helps us stay more involved with our outrage and anger as a regular practice. It does not serve us to remain blissed out in a false positivity. Wellwood points out that some try to meditate to bypass anger altogether. Instead, we can practice staying present with anger as body sensation, name it, tame it and make friends with the message it has for us. Working with anger in this way allows us to take thoughtful and effective action (2000). Expression of what Masters calls “heart-centered anger” that is mindfully grounded in compassion, as opposed to reactive aggression, heals old wounds, connects us, and allows us to act in ways that helps us achieve our desired outcome (2000). None of these thinkers advocate for staying quiet or not expressing anger, but rather doing so from a heart-centered place.

Signs Your Anger is Off Track

As I completed my research on anger I was able to formulate an anger cheat sheet of sorts. I still reflect on these to guide me when my own anger is off track. When it is I check my stress, up my mindful time in nature (even my backyard), make sure I am exercising and connecting with friends and prioritizing all of these first before busyness. This is my personal recipe for getting back to my heart. I am offering up my anger cheat sheet in hopes it serves you in making your own personal recipe.

Functioning Anger:

Is flexible in how it can be expressed.
Gives us a sense of involvement with our environment (a sense of belonging).
Gives us a greater sense of intimacy and connection to ourselves and others.
Gives us a sense of a safe boundary.

Non Functioning Anger:
Decreases Intimacy.
Decreases grounded embodiment so we are mostly moving from reaction (think aggression or avoidance).
Is in service to our animosity-stained biases from our past (think personal traumas).
Is not flexible in how it is expressed.

We have larger scale crisis going on right now of terrorism, racial injustice, poverty and planetary destruction. And we have so much going on in our personal lives to keep up. Life leaves our nervous systems ready to react, or disengage. We are all called to do our part, starting with grounding our nervous systems in love and learning to use our anger and outrage effectively. We must get off this merry go round of perpetuating collective disease and even stop it in its tracks. Only when we prioritize grounding in love and using our anger effectively can we come to the table and relate to one another with compassion and clear intention. If we do this, we can we heal so many of the ills we are facing today. I have learned some hard lessons this year about my own nervous system as well as received the reactivity from others’ ungroundedness. I am responsible, we all are responsible, for taking this first and important step of grounding in love and from there we really can change the world.

References
(Wo)man Versus Ex: Retroactive Jealousy and What to do About it.

How to Survive Your In-Laws During the Holidays

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I Was the Caregiver, But I Didn't Know How to Care
Ever have a talk about politics end in the silent treatment? Traci Ruble guides us in how to discuss controversial topics with anger grounded in love. Grounded love effectively uses our outrage to usher in bigger change. If we reactively attack each other and behave discompassionately towards one another when we are trying to heal traumatic, emotionally fraught and difficult problems in the world, we are destined to fail. I want us all to succeed and heal, don’t you? Find controversial topics to write about in an argumentative essay or to use in a speech. Learn what criteria to use when choosing your topic. Controversial Topics to Write About. Abortion—Under what circumstances should it be legal? You may want to consider age and health issues. How to Effectively Discuss Tough Topics With Your Christian Teen. 100 Persuasive Essay Topics. Great Topics for Middle School Debate Class. When you’re talking to someone, describe what angered you in neutral way. According to Chapman and Gratz, “For instance, rather than judging the person as ‘rude’ or ‘mean,’ objectively describe what that person said or did and how it made you feel.” Because practice is key to expressing your anger effectively, they suggest writing about a recent experience that angered you. Write about the situation in the same way you’d describe it to a friend. Next circle your judgements and opinions. Then rewrite the description and replace those judgements with objective language and descriptions.