

Exploring Anger in Conflict by Erika Kyte, MSW

When I was approached by Leora to share my thoughts on last summer's Generative Conflict workshop, "Oak Trees in a Storm," I quickly knew what I wanted to focus on- our relationship with anger. As a social worker, I had never heard the term Generative Conflict until last summer. As a human with almost 50 years under my belt, I had never imagined conflict **could** be generative. This reflection will explore how we might shift our learned patterns in how we approach anger.



In preparing for this exploration, I was blessed by the Universe in that applicable and surprising sources of wisdom and insight dropped onto my path. One being the sound of a toddler's uninhibited laughter. This reminded me that as babies we all had access to a full spectrum of emotions that we expressed freely and enthusiastically. We are born whole and then the whittling begins pretty quickly. How a newborn's needs are



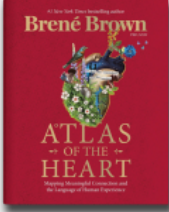

met or not met informs her worldview; contributes to whether she perceives the world as a safe place to be trusted or as a battlefield requiring shields and weapons. The environment in which the baby develops- her family, community and society in general- determines how her emotional expressions will be pruned, which will be nipped in the bud and which will be encouraged to blossom. What will serve her? In binary terms, will she grow to view anger as shameful, in so-called polite society, or as the only safe emotion, in the so-called streets?

I have a student from an underserved community who sees herself as two separate identities; let's call them Jocelyn and JJ. Jocelyn is loving and open to connection; JJ is guarded and distant, ready to fight at the slightest threat. Both of these identities serve her in different environments, but she is tired of reflexive code-switching, and is looking to integrate these identities, to reclaim her birthright of wholeness. She is becoming intentional, which, as we know, always starts with awareness.

I see my student as exceptional in her self-awareness and budding emotional intelligence. This view is supported by the results from Brené Brown's surveys taken by 7,000 people over five years, that on average people can identify only **three** emotions as they are actually feeling them: **happiness, sadness and anger**. This means that by adulthood, our full spectrum of accessible emotions has been pruned down to three, from the 87 that Brown has recently identified as key for living wholly.

87 Human Emotions & Experiences

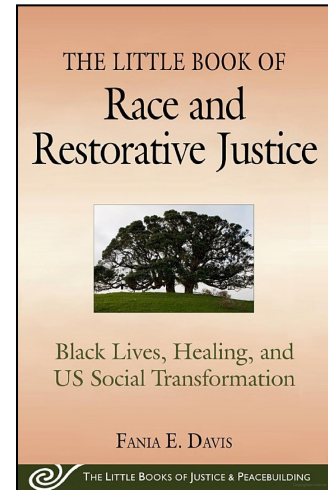
Based on the research of *Atlas of the Heart* by Brené Brown

<p>PLACES WE GO WHEN Things Are Uncertain Or Too Much</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stress • Overwhelm • Anxiety • Worry • Avoidance • Excitement • Dread • Fear • Vulnerability 	<p>PLACES WE GO WHEN We Compare</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Comparison • Admiration • Reverence • Envy • Jealousy • Resentment • Schadenfreude • Freudenfreude 	<p>PLACES WE GO WHEN Things Don't Go As Planned</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Boredom • Disappointment • Expectations • Regret • Discouragement • Resignation • Frustration 	<p>PLACES WE GO WHEN It's Beyond Us</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Awe • Wonder • Confusion • Curiosity • Interest • Surprise 	<p>PLACES WE GO WHEN Things Aren't What They Seem</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Amusement • Bittersweetness • Nostalgia • Cognitive Dissonance • Paradox • Irony • Sarcasm
<p>PLACES WE GO WHEN We're Hurting</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anguish • Hopelessness • Despair • Sadness • Grief 	<p>PLACES WE GO WITH Others</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Compassion • Pity • Empathy • Sympathy • Boundaries • Comparative Suffering 	<p>PLACES WE GO WHEN We Fall Short</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shame • Self-Compassion • Perfectionism • Guilt • Humiliation • Embarrassment 	<p>PLACES WE GO WHEN We Search for Connection</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Belonging • Fitting In • Connection • Disconnection • Insecurity • Invisibility • Loneliness 	<p>PLACES WE GO WHEN The Heart Is Open</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Love • Lovelessness • Heartbreak • Trust • Self-Trust • Betrayal • Defensiveness • Flooding • Hurt
<p>PLACES WE GO WHEN Life Is Good</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Joy • Happiness • Calm • Contentment • Gratitude • Foreboding Joy • Relief • Tranquility 	<p>PLACES WE GO WHEN We Feel Wronged</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anger • Contempt • Disgust • Dehumanization • Hate • Self-Righteousness 	<p>PLACES WE GO TO Self-Assess</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pride • Hubris • Humility 		 <p>© 2022 Brené Brown, LLC All rights reserved www.brenebrown.com Page 1 of 2</p>

One thing I find interesting about this is that while the emotion and presentation of anger is easy for most people to name, few people recognize that anger is often actually a secondary emotion immediately following on the heels of fear or hurt. Anger reflexively shows up to protect us from those more vulnerable feelings, which are a lot more complex and historically difficult to express with satisfying results. Anger's

intention is to protect, and yet when expressed aggressively it tends to result in division, which I see as counter to our survival. Used differently, anger can serve as a tool for growth.

I would like to point out here that one benefit of anger is that it can motivate protest and societal evolution. The training acknowledged that “Conflict is part of being alive. We live in a dominant culture of underreaction to abuse and overreaction to conflict.” Abuse can spark valid anger, which can spark conflict, which, in our current societal structure, is simply squashed as those in power prioritize and perpetuate divisive power structure over community. The recommendation for dismantling this current structure, according to Fania E. Davis, author of The Little Book of Race and Restorative Justice, is to “live and work at the intersection of activism and healing.” Cue generative conflict, please...



Frequently when I want to figure out how a behavior evolved I will imagine the days of cave-people, when one had to learn to evade predators to survive. Since humanity’s early days the predator or threat has shifted from a saber-toothed tiger to “civilization” itself. The qualifications for “survival of the fittest” have evolved from biological to social traits. So, what helps us survive socially? Again that depends on the environment of the individual. And are we talking about survival in this moment or over a lifetime or generations?

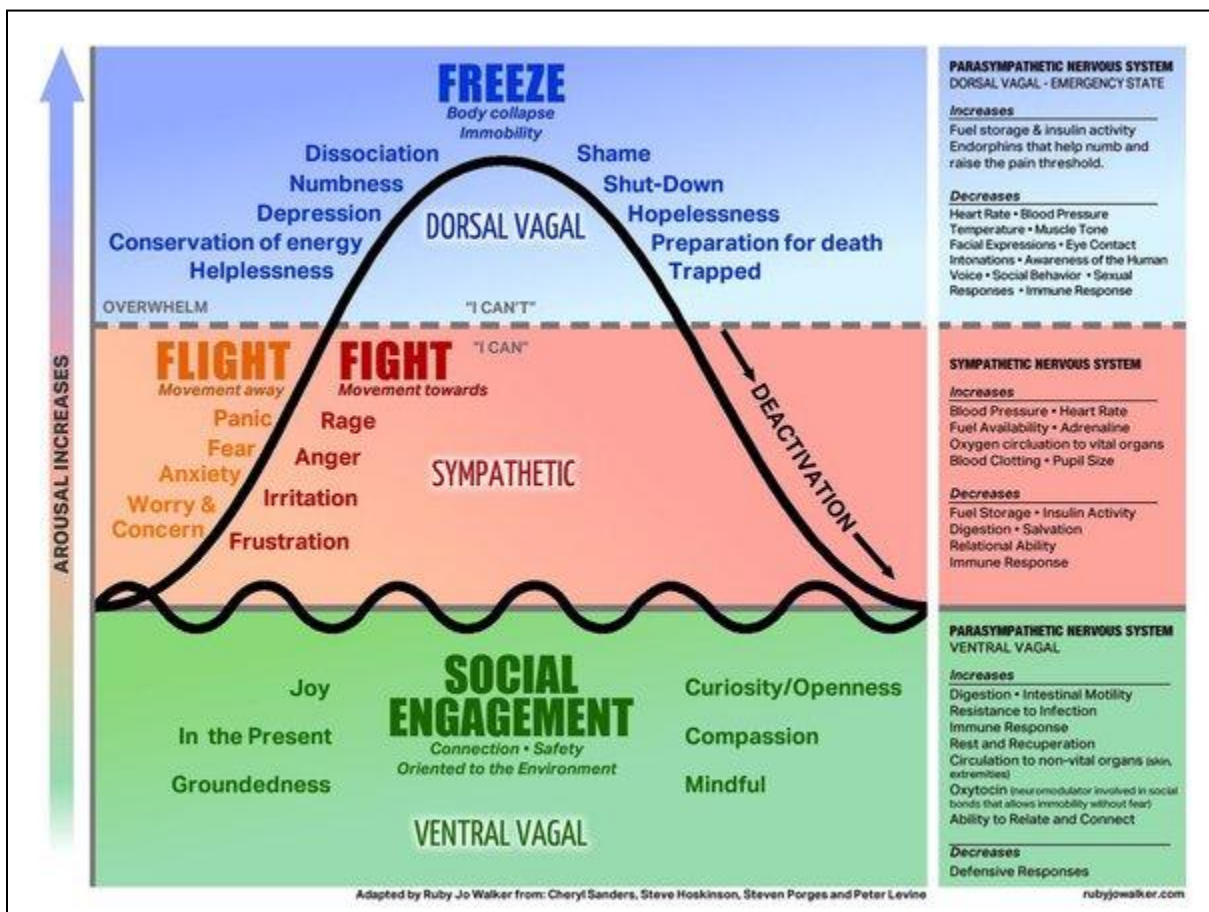


These days we are all very aware of trauma and its generational effects. I would like to compare trauma reactions with our reactions to conflict. Both are rooted in our personal histories and have developed to serve and protect us and, until we become more intentional about them both, show up reflexively. As it was noted in the “Oak Trees in a Storm” training, “Trauma is not a flaw or weakness. It is a highly effective tool of safety

and survival. It is the body's protective response to an event- or series of events- that it perceives as potentially dangerous." How we each respond to conflict has also arisen as protective since our nervous system sees disagreement or conflict as threat and reacts similarly with biological and emotional escalation.

Automatic approach to anger:

Harm from another > threat perception > automatic defensive reaction (fight, flight, freeze) > conflict > alienation



Let's look at what our traditional trauma responses (setting aside more recently-recognized fawn) of **fight, flight, or freeze** reactions may look like socially, emotionally and behaviorally. Our training in August identified automatic nervous system responses and behaviors akin to **fight** such as "shunning, blaming, projecting,

dehumanizing the other.” **Fight** can sound like core beliefs such as “I have to protect my sense of self to stay safe, so my behavior can’t be questioned”; “Everyone is out to get me/always blames me for everything”; “If you disagree with me, it means I am bad/disposable/ unlovable.” **Flight or freeze** can look like “nervous giggling/laughter, avoiding engagement, shutting down, and disassociation” and sound like “I have the right to feel comfortable in every context”; “Comfort and safety feel the same to my body”; “My reasons/history/pain is more important than yours”; “I am a good person.”

An individual’s nervous system defaulting to **fight** looks like escalation of a conflict while **flight or freeze** in social conflict translates to conflict avoidance. Similar to avoiding one’s trauma triggers, like not walking by that one place where that one thing happened, some people choose to handle conflict by avoiding it, not addressing it. Again defaulting to safety and comfort, hunkering down behind walls made of long-held core (usually un/subconscious) beliefs, occupying smaller and smaller spaces. Growth, expansion, and generativity will happen only when we face and address trauma or conflict, when we lean into the discomfort rather than fear it.

So, how can we use anger as a tool for connection? The keys, as demonstrated in my students, are intentionality and self-awareness. Most of us live reflexively. Living intentionally requires pause for thought, inserting even just one breath between action and reaction. In a social conflict, when we take control of our breath and regulate it with the intention of soothing, we signal to the nervous system that there is no actual threat, no need to retreat to the reptilian brain. Our breath communicates to the brain that it is safe to re-expand into the cerebral cortex and frontal lobe where we can access logic and reasoning and emotional regulation, all of which can help us survive not just in the moment of disagreement but also longterm. In the training, this intentional practice was referred to as “Befriending our nervous system.”



Intentional approach to anger:

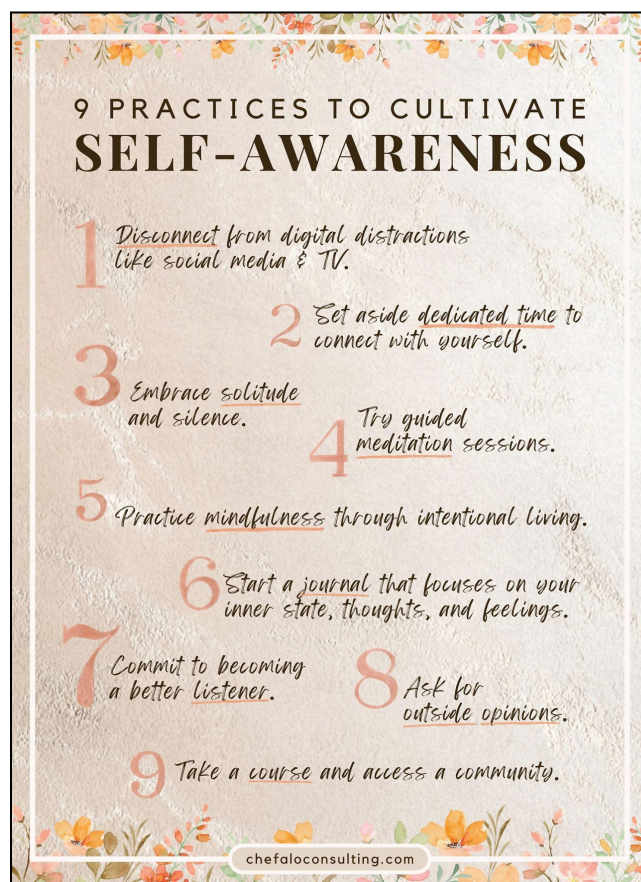
Harm from another > pause > intentional breath > self-awareness > generative conflict > connection/community

sharpen the mind's focus onto conscious or intentional inner reflection. This can look like sitting or lying in stillness with the eyes closed to gaze inward, becoming aware of and connecting with Self. With our world's constant sensory thrum and minefield of triggers, this conscious creation of time for reflection is what is required to direct intentional steps on our chosen path.

Your intentional reflection may not involve yoga and meditation; you may opt for journaling, talking it over with friends, prayer, mindful movement, or anything else that helps you tap into your truth.

In your practice of focused soul-searching around conflict, here are some helpful questions from "Oak Trees in a Storm" to ask of Self:

What physical sensations and emotions do I tend to feel during conflict?
What are those rooted in?
How do my learned patterns serve me?
How do they hold me back?
What emotions do I tend to express during conflict?
How would I like to express myself differently?
What would it look like if I practiced resisting escalation?
If anger is frequently a cover for fear or hurt, about what do I feel fear or hurt?



Another proactive practice for living intentionally is the use of mantras or positive affirmations. One of my morning mantras that helps me immensely is "I'm a capable person and can handle anything that comes my way." A few others that can direct your attention toward pursuit of your truth include:

I am in alignment with universal wisdom.

I trust my intuition and follow it with ease.

I can see the light within every soul today and always.

In my own life when I'm seeking my own truth or universal wisdom, I often revisit Nonviolent Communication which provides an alternate way of viewing my own actions and those of others: **Every action is an attempt to meet a need.** This prompts me to shift my thinking from "Why is he doing this to me?" to "What need is he trying to meet?" A few years ago when I discovered this form of communication and this shifted perspective that Marshall Rosenberg developed in the 60's, it changed my life. The stories I told myself about conflicts no longer starred evil, mean people, but people who had been hurt. When we bring empathy to a conflict, we disarm it. When we lead with love for ourselves and others, we are not confined by fear. Fear and hurt in the guise of anger keep us stuck in the mud; love and empathy allow a conflict to become generative.



This is never easy. Cultivating unconditional empathy is hard work, and again it starts within. When we spend time exploring and nurturing our inner landscapes, we emphasize the value of our hearts and emotions. The more we honor our own humanity, the more we recognize it in others. It starts with us.

I have faith in the future and I see a shift in my adolescent students, a pursuit of self- and other- awareness and intentionality. Just as Oprah brought so many similar topics to the attention of the general public over her decades behind a mic, I am hoping that Brene Brown's current platform and message cultivate a sea change.



I like to think that in this quote Brown pays homage to Nonviolent Communication that was developed to provide a compassionate form of modern conflict resolution and everyday communication. Rosenberg classified messages as either "life-affirming" or "life-alienating," recognizing that words volleyed back and forth between individuals or groups can serve to connect or separate.

I would like to suggest that the “violent communication” (judging, advising/ “shoulding,” demanding, denying responsibility or even using such words as right/wrong) typically involved in conflicts is at the root of our discomfort with and avoidance of conflict. When messages are not rooted in empathy or love, conflict itself is life-alienating, perceived as a threat to one’s belonging in community. I believe that at our very core, as supported by indigenous wisdom, we are all looking for connection and that this is how we survive and thrive socially.



The last question I would like to propose in this work is: “What can I own in this conflict and what is rooted in the other? What is mine and what is yours?”

Shortly after attending the Generative Conflict workshop, I was introduced to a video on YouTube about **accountability** that tied right in. <https://youtu.be/QZuJ55iGI14>. The message therein was so novel to me, groundbreaking and felt so brave. The video outlines these new tenets for shifting our perception of and approach to conflict from something to avoid in fear or escalate in hurt to opportunities for generativity:

We’re all going to hurt each other at some point.

The shift requires self-reflection and dealing with shame, rooted in the divisiveness of our culture, and choosing community and connection instead.

Socialization needs to switch to caring for each other.

Practice and demonstrate insight.

Getting our needs met collectively.

Asking: what need were you getting met by causing harm?

Accountability is the opposite of punishment, which says that you have no humanity. Accountability says you still matter, our relationship still matters.

I choose to stay in community with you.