



JENNIFER SPELMAN

Readers Write

ANGER

AFTER MY FIRST SON WAS BORN, I WAS flexible, generous, in tune. Then I had my second child, and I started yelling at my now-three-year-old son almost every day. Once, he was bouncing the baby's seat too hard. I told him to stop, and when he didn't, I slapped him. I knew then it was I who needed to stop.

I read a Buddhist book on anger and learned to recognize the itchy hotness that preceded my outbursts. I learned that there were times when anything I said or did would cause pain, and I chose to walk away instead. The only place to "walk away" to when you're home alone with a three-year-old and a baby in a sling turns out to be the bathroom. I say to my son, as he bangs the phone, spills the cat's water, pulls the clothes off the clothesline, or squishes figs into the rug (sometimes all at once), "I am feeling angry. I am going to take care of my anger," and I head for the bathroom. He says, "I'm coming with you," and follows me. The

only thing I can remember from the book is to close my eyes and slowly breathe in and out, three times. So that is what I do.

My days are composed of hundreds of variations on this moment. I'm learning to lengthen the gap between feeling angry and taking action. I've found that it's possible to watch the feelings pass and let the desire to act or speak fall away. I open my eyes and discover myself and my children standing on the other side, unharmed.

*Stacy Lewis
Seattle, Washington*

WHEN MY SON JOSEPH PASSED AWAY just three months short of his seventh birthday, I was not angry at God, as so many people asked if I was. No, the night he died, as the EMTs worked on him, I knelt and prayed to a picture of Jesus, desperate to convince him to help my son.

When we came home from the hos-

pital that night without Joseph, the first thing I did was pull out the stepladder so that I could take down the picture of Jesus. But still I wasn't angry at God. I was angry at myself. Jesus's picture was a reminder of my failure to pray the right words that would have saved my son. I'd heard of many mothers whose children had been brought back from the brink of death by prayer. Having carried Joseph in my womb and been the first to know him, I should have known the words to speak to keep him alive.

I tried to dissect my prayer and understand where I'd gone wrong. How could I have said it another way? Had I not offered enough in return for my son's life? I shared my thoughts with no one, because I was afraid people would agree that I had indeed been responsible for my son's death. For years I thought the fault was mine.

*Sandra Payan
El Paso, Texas*

AS A TEEN I WOULD OFTEN GET ANGRY with my parents, yelling and even running away. In the middle of one fight, when I was sixteen, I ran to my bedroom and slammed the door. I stood in my room, the noise still ringing in my ears, and thought, *What an ugly sound*. I decided that, from that day on, I would remain calm no matter what.

Controlling my anger was surprisingly easy once I set my mind to it. My even tone of voice often made my mother furious. Nothing she did would unsettle me. This sometimes brought her to tears.

It took me years to understand that, though I had managed not to exhibit anger, I could still be cruel.

*Nathan Long
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania*

THERE WERE NINE OF US IN OUR TWO-bedroom bungalow: seven kids, my mom, and our new stepfather, Gerald. He was good-looking, friendly, and, in our young eyes, a hero because he'd married our mom, allowing us to come home from the orphanage after four years. We didn't even mind that the seven of us were crammed into one bedroom with two triple bunk beds and a crib. We were together.

Gerald's bad moods arrived with no explanation. He would fall silent one day and go weeks without speaking to anyone in our house. We kids always figured he and Mom were fighting, but many times even Mom had no idea what had triggered his stony silence. As soon as Gerald arrived home from work, we would all stop talking too. He'd eat his dinner in his recliner while he watched television. We would eat our meal at the dining-room table and then watch whatever he chose, usually something dull like *The Lawrence Welk Show*.

Mom's response was to stay cheerful and tolerate Gerald's moods, which always passed. "At least he doesn't drink" was her mantra. Gerald's sisters had told us the story of how he'd lost his mother, with whom he was very close, when he was twelve: He'd gotten into an argument with her, yelled that he wished she were dead, and run out the back door. When he'd returned an hour later, he'd found her on the kitchen floor, dead of a heart attack. So we tried to understand and

forgive his episodes.

But I had a hard time not taking my stepfather's silence personally. He was a lathing contractor and often invited me to go with him to job sites, where I collected scrap copper wiring to sell. When his bad moods struck, he would cut me off. After his moods vanished — always as mysteriously as they had appeared, no explanation or apology — I would struggle with my hurt feelings while he wooed me back. It didn't take much: a root-beer float or an ice-cream cone. I felt guilty for taking his bribes, and I eventually lost interest in being his special buddy. The rejection was too painful.

Looking back, I think Gerald had such moods because he was afraid to show his anger. His silence poisoned our mental health as a family and taught us that unresolved feelings are acceptable only if they also remain unexpressed.

*Francis Collin Brown
Port Townsend, Washington
(end of excerpt)*

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