

Barbara Deming (1917–1984) was a writer and an activist spanning many movements. Her work for disarmament, civil rights and peace, her feminist analysis and her lesbian-feminist activity in the women's liberation movement, were vital in moving pacifism beyond mere opposition to war. Here we print an extract from her classic 1971 speech.

On Anger:

Are pacifists willing to be angry?

What should our relation be to the very many comrades we struggle alongside who are not committed, as we are, to nonviolence?

I submit that we are in one struggle. There is a sense, even, in which we can say that we do share the same faith. When we define the kind of world that we want to bring into being, our vision and theirs too is of a world in which no person exploits another, abuses, dominates another — in short, a nonviolent world. We differ about how to bring this world into being, and that's a very real difference. But we are in the same struggle and we need each other. We need to take strengths from each other, and we need to learn from each other.

I'm going to talk particularly about our relationship to anger. A lot of people next to whom we find ourselves struggling are very angry people. Black people are angry. Welfare mothers are angry. Women are furious. Gay people — in spite of that name — are angry. Prisoners are angry. How do we relate to their anger? And how do we relate to the anger when we feel it ourselves? Because that has a lot to do with how we relate to them.

I started thinking about this especially after a recent experience I had with a friend, a sister — a young woman who has been very deeply touched and changed by the women's liberation movement. When I first met her she was much involved in the anti-war movement and committed to nonviolence. Now she has concentrated above all on resistance to her own oppression and that of her sisters; and she was no longer sure that she was committed to nonviolence. Though in the past she had remained

nonviolent in the most extreme situations — taken jailings, taken beatings — she told me that she could now all too easily imagine killing a man.

We had a long talk. I spoke of what seems to me the deep, deep need for the women's movement to be a nonviolent movement if we want to make the changes that we need swiftly and surely as we can. And if we want to see the fewest possible people hurt in the struggle.

I spoke of the need I see for us to reassure men continually, as we take from them the privileges they have had so long, take from them the luxury of not having to be weaned from their mothers' care,

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because they can count on wives, mistresses to play mother to them still. I spoke of the need to convince them that this loss will not be as grievous as they fear, that the pleasure of relating to others as equals may really prove greater than the pleasure of relating to others as merely shadows of themselves, as second selves. I spoke of the inevitability of panic on most men's part; they are so used to the present state of things. And so the need to reassure them

at the same time as we stubbornly refuse them the old relationships.

Well, it was a long talk. I wasn't at all sure how persuasive I was being. And, as it happened, some time later a mutual friend reported to me that my sister felt estranged from me. And here is how she summed it up. She didn't feel that I sufficiently respected her anger.

This took me by surprise. For I feel that I do indeed respect it. I have often felt very deep anger myself, about the roles in which women and men are cast. Perhaps I had withheld from her a full description of that anger, because it was painful for me to describe it and to look at it. I think that I could not kill anyone. But I have to acknowledge that in many moments of anger I have, in effect, wished a man dead — wished him not there for me to cope with.

In his book *Gandhi's Truth*, Erik Erikson writes to Gandhi as though he were still alive, and offers certain criticisms of him. He writes, of certain things Gandhi wrote, "I seemed to sense the presence of... something unclean, when all the words spelled out an unreal purity." I believe that the response he describes is a response to us experienced by many of our comrades. They sense in us an unreal purity.

There is a terrible irony here. Because we want above all to be able to persuade people that truth is a powerful weapon. But





how can we communicate such power if we give the impression of not daring to be truthful to ourselves?

Many radicals feel that we are not quite healthy. They feel that there is health in anger. They see anger as a necessary emotion if there is to be any change.

I think there is some truth in this. I think there is clearly a kind of anger that is healthy. It is the concentration of one's whole being in the determination: this must change. It is not in itself violent — even when it raises its voice (which it sometimes does) and brings about agitation and confrontation (which it always does). It contains both respect for oneself and for the other. To oneself it says, "I must change — for I have been playing the part of the slave." To the other it says, "You must change — for you have been playing the part of the tyrant." It contains the conviction that change is possible — for both sides; and it is capable of transmitting this conviction to others, touching them with the energy of it — even one's antagonist.

Why do we who believe in nonviolence shy away from the word?

Well, because there is another kind of anger, very familiar to us, that is not healthy, that is an affliction.

This anger asserts to another not, "you must change and you *can* change", but:

"your very existence is a threat to my very existence". It speaks not hope but fear. The fear is: you can't change — and I can't change if you are still there.

The one anger is healthy and concentrates all one's energies. The other leaves one trembling, because it is murderous. Because we dream of a new society in

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which murder has no place; and it disturbs that dream.

Our task, of course, is to transmute the anger that is affliction into the anger that is determination to bring about change. I think, in fact, that one could give that as a definition of revolution.

I am not suggesting that we abandon any of the struggles that we have been taking part in. I am suggesting that we will take upon ourselves the further

struggle of confronting our own personal oppression, we will find ourselves better able to wage those struggles too — because we act in more conscious solidarity. Confronting our oppression, I mean, in the company of others — for what seems deeply personal is in truth political.

For those of us who are women — or gay — it is probably clear enough what anger I mean should be faced — though it is often hard enough to admit to. But I would very much include the men among you. For if women are oppressed by men, and cannot fully be themselves, men in succumbing to all the pressures put upon them from an early age to dominate, lose the chance to be freely themselves. And I cannot believe that there is not in men a deep, buried anger about this.

Those who have played an important role in counselling men who are unwilling to commit aggression in wars, might consider playing a comparable role in counselling men who would like to know how to resist committing aggression at home — against women.

I suggest that if we are willing to confront our own most seemingly personal angers, in their raw state, and take upon ourselves the task of translating this raw anger into the disciplined anger of the search for change, we will find ourselves in a position to speak much more persuasively to comrades about the need to root out from all anger the spirit of murder.

This talk was written for delivery at the US War Resisters League national conference in Athens, Georgia, 4-6 September 1971. It was read by a friend because Barbara was in an car accident on the way there.