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TIGERS OF WRATH

Senselessly, constantly, aggressive energy is misused everywhere on our planet. Every day this fundamental energy, more elusive than the most fleeting phantom and yet - as its victims would all agree -more powerful than a storming sea, causes innumerable kinds of pain. Every day, through the most sophisticated and respectable means or, on the contrary, through the most primitive ones, physical and psychological murders are committed. Every day, people's rights to physical and emotional safety and survival are threatened. Every day people are insulted, discriminated against, attacked, tortured, and killed.

Moreover, millions of persons involuntarily direct their aggressive energy against themselves, causing (psychosomatic medicine tells us) such disturbances as heart disease, hypertension, obesity, stomach diseases, and intestinal, sexual, respiratory, skin, and rheumatic troubles. And this same energy of aggression is found to be one of the determining factors in various psychological ills such as certain forms of depression, guilt, obsessive and paranoid syndromes, and perhaps some cases of psychosis.

Even more common are the countless ways in which aggressive energy poisons our everyday psychological lives and our personal interactions. As this partial list suggests, this problem can assume an immense variety of forms:

Cold, silent hatred	Passive sabotage
Criticism	Cruelty
Self-destructiveness	Bitterness
Sarcasm	Quarrelsomeness
Irritation	Malevolence
Resentment	Unreasoning dissent
Pique	Sulkiness
Vicarious enjoyment of violence	Blind rage
Grumbling	Frustration
Brooding	Spite
Aggressive fantasies	Vengefulness
Sneering	Hostility

Is aggression, then, merely sickness to be cured and eliminated? Far from it. Many factors can distort and exaggerate aggression and even transform it into violence: personal isolation and lack of communication, the absence of love (especially during the early years), overcrowding or scarcity of resources, repression, negative environmental models, improper nutrition, and so on. Effective, systematic action on these problems will alleviate many of the negative results of aggression. We can best understand aggression in itself, however, not by looking at its worst forms, but by seeing it in its simple essence - in the words of Assagioli, "a blind impulse to self-affirmation, to the expression of all the elements of one's being, without any discrimination and choice, without any concern for the consequences, without any consideration for others". Then we realize that we have at our disposal a form of **natural energy**.

All natural energies are neutral. The energies of the wind, of the sun, of the atom, of a river can cause catastrophes or prevent them. They can kill or they can sustain. It is a sad fact that we are much more proficient in directing and using physical energy than in mastering and channeling our own aggression. Yet the two tasks are parallel, and we can succeed in one as we have succeeded in the other.

REVIEW ON AGGRESSION

The following questions will allow you to look at the ways you experience aggression:

1. What form does aggressive energy take for you?
Take a few minutes and think of the ways in which you manage your aggressive energy; see what your favorite channels and habitual modes are.
2. Do you express or repress your aggressive energy?
3. What is your attitude about aggressive energy - do you fear it, despise it, enjoy it, harvest it?
Or do you, perhaps, fail to experience it at all?
4. Are there specific patterns to your aggressive energy? And situations or people that specifically tend to arouse it?

We can look at it as a natural process - a wave of aggressive energy arises in the individual, becomes powerful, and pushes forcefully forward to express itself. At this point at least two possibilities are presented: First, the person may be frightened, shy, or unwilling to break his or her own standards of courtesy, so the aggressive wave is repressed causing all kinds

of psychophysical harm, from psychosomatic to purely psychological ills. **Or** - and this happens especially with extroverted, action-oriented people - the wave finds an outlet in the shape of words and deeds, sometimes constructively and sometimes not.

No general rule can be made about expressing aggression. On the one hand, you have individuals who, being generally shy and easily walked over by others, are at a loss in the jungle of everyday life. They rightly take the act of boldly asserting themselves as a victory, and they rejoice in being able to speak up frankly and courageously and, sometimes, to explode.

Some individuals also find that expressing their anger with persons who understand and love them may help their mutual relationship; after the initial shock, the situation is changed and a new clarity can emerge. As Blake beautifully expressed it,

I was angry with my friend:
I told my wrath, my wrath did end.
I was angry with my foe:
I told it not, my wrath did grow.

But it would be a great mistake to generalize such experiences and believe that freely expressing aggression is right and helpful at all times. Words said in a moment of exasperation can cloud a relationship forever. Many forms of anger can hurt and even destroy what is soft and beautiful in another person, stifling growth, generating misunderstandings, kindling the desire for revenge, and so on.

Fortunately, we can also choose to harmlessly **discharge** our aggression. Simple but excellent methods of doing so have been described by many authors: punching a pillow or tetherball, repeatedly and violently hitting a mattress with a tennis racket, tearing up newspapers, writing a cruel letter to a person we are angry at (and then not sending it). Such methods work equally well with current hurts as with accumulated resentments, and they should become part of our habits as a culture. They enable us to eliminate emotional *débris* which would otherwise impede the free flow of our functioning. Unfortunately, people who most need to use these methods often rationalize their fear of adopting them, calling them ridiculous, useless, or undignified.

Another important possibility is available to us: We can **transform** aggressive energy - we can alter its target and mode of expression while leaving its intensity intact. Let's go back to our wave; the wave emerges and pushes forward, but this time it is given a shape and a target different

from those it originally had. None of its momentum is repressed, but its new expression is now positive and congruent with the course of our lives.

To quote from a couple of reports:

Whenever I feel anger rising in me, I immediately convert this energy into putting my apartment in order. And I always have a **very** tidy apartment.

When I got low marks in an exam I became very angry, and I invested that anger right away into studying for the next exam. I fed my desire to study with my own rage, which improved my concentration tremendously.

Some basic points emerge as we consider the attitude underlying these examples. First, we can most easily transform that from which we are disidentified. For this to happen, we must see our anger, our aggressive impulses, with an objectivity and a lack of judgment which, as we shall see, is the mark of true love. These impulses are elements of our being and therefore intrinsically valid. There has to be a fundamental respect: any condemnation of our aggressive energies is an act of psychological blindness which makes transformation impossible. Second, there is something beautiful and profoundly vital about aggressive energy. Unfortunately, many people look at it with dread. They often automatically associate aggression with violence and wrongly assume that by concentrating on developing higher qualities they will make it dissolve. Usually they only succeed in repressing it.

While aggressive energy at its most primitive levels can become destructive, in its more evolved form it becomes creative power. Many spiritual leaders have warned against despising or deprecating aggression, pointing to the consequent dangers of helplessness and resignation. Ramakrishna, for example, used to narrate the story of an incredibly fierce and venomous snake. One day this snake met a sage and, overpowered by the latter's gentleness, lost its ferocity. The sage advised it to stop hurting people, and the snake resolved to live a life of innocence, without harming anyone.

But as soon as the people in a nearby village realized that the snake wasn't dangerous anymore, they started to throw stones at it, to drag it by the tail and tease it in innumerable ways. The snake was having a very hard time.

Luckily, the sage passed by the place again, and after seeing how badly battered the snake was and listening to its complaints, he simply said: "My friend, I told you to stop hurting people - I didn't tell you never to hiss at them and scare them away". Ramakrishna concludes, "There is no harm in

"hissing" at wicked men and at your enemies, showing that you can protect yourself and know how to resist evil. Only you must be careful not to pour your venom into the blood of your enemy. Resist not evil by causing evil in return".

Let us now look in greater detail at an example of how one person succeeded in starting to turn her own aggressive energy from enemy into friend. Julia is a powerhouse with immense energy. She doesn't walk up the stairs - she runs. She doesn't enter my office - she rushes in. She doesn't talk - she shoots out her words. But all this energy is not utilized in healthy ways. Besides expressing some of it in harmless forms, Julia has the tendency to keep much of it inside, turning it against herself. She says, in retrospect: "I used to avoid any aggressive act, because I had the feeling that as soon as I did the slightest thing there would be an explosion capable of tearing the whole world apart".

She adds: "My aggressiveness has always been turned against me. Sounds like an epitaph, doesn't it?" No other words could better describe her situation. She has received a lot of aggressiveness in her life and held it in. Her father used to beat her regularly, and her mother imposed a rigid, obsessive control on her. "I have incorporated this aggression", Julia says, "and elevated it into a way of life. I have made it mine, and kept it inside. How else could I have managed not to kill my parents?"

For Julia, the outcomes of aggression turned inward are a self-destructive attitude (leading her to an attempted suicide during her adolescence), depression, disturbances in her sleep cycle, "inability to surrender to the joy of life", and obsessive thinking. It is as if the energy not expressed kindles her thoughts, forces them into repetitive patterns and ideas which never find an outlet but just turn in infernal, never-ending circles of torture. Another prominent trait is Julia's "bitter satisfaction", as she calls it, an attitude of revelling in her pain and of turning into agony whatever she would naturally tend to enjoy. She also calls this attitude her "sado-masochism". To try to suffocate this pain, she gorges herself with food.

Julia was twenty-one and a university student when she started working with me. Her husband was sixteen years older, and the marriage was troubled. She has, however, managed to survive her many difficulties and shows a brilliant mind and a passionate interest in everything. Moreover, she has a highly developed sense of beauty, an urge to share and relate, and the extraordinary but disorderly vitality of which we have already spoken.

Over a considerable period of time the key for Julia has clearly been to learn how to invest her aggressive energy in an activity she likes and values, instead of turning it against herself. To a considerable extent she has

systematically learned the knack of using aggression as **fuel** for her activities. "I chose studying", she says, "because that is a natural channel of expression for me". As soon as she gained some facility, Julia was able to transform studying - previously a painful, empty duty for her - into an activity filled with life and interest.

Now Julia elaborates on and utilizes what she reads, and her attention is so passionate that she sometimes becomes aware that "two hours have passed only after they have gone by". After studying, she feels tranquil and satisfied. As the process has continued, she has broadened the range of her energy investments: she has become involved with mime, started acting, found a part-time job in a school, and written her thesis. Meanwhile, I must add, she regularly beats her bed with a tennis racket in order to discharge her surplus aggressive energy.

Julia did not achieve these results by imposition. Instead she learned the new knack gradually and introduced it into her life almost as a subterfuge. She merely utilized the exercise described later in this chapter and let it seep into herself, and eventually the new attitude spontaneously emerged in her everyday life. She puts it simply: "The more exercises I do, the better". Whenever she tries to impose a new habit rigidly and mechanically, however, her psychophysical organism rebels. This reaction is quite understandable in her case, endowed as she is with a sensitive alarm system against all imposition - a residue of her suffering at the hands of her authoritarian parents. But such sensitivity in introducing a new attitude is important for other people besides Julia; indeed, we may take it as a universal rule if we want to avoid contrary reactions.

Julia now feels her aggressive energy to be "the greatest problem" and at the same time "the propelling force" of her life. At times the old patterns show up again; they have been learned through the years and cannot be wiped away overnight. But the new skill is hers, gradually becoming part of her life. "When I succeed in not killing myself with my own energy", she says, "I realize all the wonderful things I am able to do".

Here is the exercise that Julia used with such good effect. It should be performed **only** when one is actually experiencing some form of aggressive feelings or is close enough to retrieve them easily. If that is not so now, simply read the exercise and come back to it later.

TRANSFORMING AGGRESSIVE ENERGY

1. Pick a project or an activity to which you want to give more "steam".

2. Now, laying that project aside for the time being, get in touch with your aggressive feelings. Feel their vigor, their vibrancy, the effect they have on your body, and, perhaps, the hurt which they cause you. Give them, so to speak, space - that is, observe them without judging them or immediately labeling them in some way.
3. Now realize that these feelings are energy at your disposal, energy that is precious and can **do** things. It can hurt, but it can also become the propelling power for the project or activity you have chosen.
4. Now vividly imagine yourself in the midst of your project or activity. Call to mind as many details as you can with your imagination. Imagine the moves involved, but see them now kindled and intensified by the vitality you have chosen to invest in them.

The transformation of aggressive energy is no artificial gimmick. Our task is to master the laws of this process rather than letting it happen only by chance. It is useful, therefore, to take a look at how creative people of all times have used aggression. Aggression in many forms has often been the key to their trade. "Facit indignatio versus", wrote the Latin poet Quintilianus: "My anger creates my verses". In a different culture and occupation, Einstein was described by his friend Infeld as using "unbelievable obstinacy" to pursue his mathematical problems - which ten years later emerged as relativity theory - without any need of encouragement or help from outside sources.

At other times indignation at existing circumstances has been transmuted into actions aimed at changing those very circumstances. As Emerson put it, "Good indignation brings out all one's power". And, when asked what had been the motivating factor behind her immensely productive work in hospitals, Florence Nightingale answered with one word: "Rage".

Let us end with the examples of two great artists who succeeded to an unusually high degree in expressing their struggles and their inner power in their work: Michelangelo and Beethoven.

In listening to the music of Beethoven, one is often impressed by the way its dynamic potency sharply differentiates it from the classical elegance of the other works of his time. And in viewing many of Michelangelo's statues and paintings, one is struck by what his contemporaries called "terribilita" - the sense of sublime grandeur and intensity. Naturally the few scattered documents we have are insufficient to reconstruct in detail the complex

inner process of creation. A few words here and there, however, suggest that the propelling agent behind much of the work of these two geniuses was aggressive energy in the widest sense of the word - a spectrum of psychological hues from rage to vigor to the creative urge. A French visitor, for instance, reported at that time:

Michelangelo could hammer more chips out of very hard marble in a quarter hour than three young stonemasons could do in three or four, which has to be seen to be believed, and he went at it with such impetuosity and fury that I thought the whole work must go to pieces, knocking off with one blow chips three or four fingers thick, so close to the mark that, if he had gone even slightly beyond, he ran the danger of ruining everything.

No wonder that his biographer, Vasari, tells us Michelangelo himself used to say that "using the hammer kept his body healthy".

Beethoven, too, despite his irregular life and the difficulties and despair caused by his deafness, found a way to nurture his work with his aggressive energy. We are told, for instance, by a contemporary English visitor of what happened when Beethoven played the piano: "He seems to feel the bold, the commanding, the impetuous, more than what is soothing and gentle. The muscles of his face swell, and its veins start out; the wild eye rolls doubly wild; the mouth quivers, and Beethoven looks like a wizard, overpowered by the demons whom he himself has called up".

But perhaps the best evidence is given by Beethoven's own words, as reported verbatim by a friend, to whom he explained how the process of creation occurred for him: "You will ask me where I get my ideas. That I cannot say with certainty. They come unbidden, indirectly, directly. I could grasp them with my hands; in the midst of nature, in the woods, on walks, in the silence of the night, in the early morning, inspired by moods that translate themselves into words for the poet and into tones for me, that **sound, surge, roar**, until at last they stand before me as notes".

To conclude: on this planet one person kills another every twenty seconds. One dollar out of six is given to military expenses. It costs \$14,800 per year to maintain a soldier versus \$230 to educate a child. A gun is sold in the United States every 13 seconds. The tragically clumsy way in which humanity handles its own aggression generates massive destructiveness. We all realize that the solutions to this immense problem are difficult and extremely complex. But these shocking statistics suggest the importance of personal transformation as one of the many ways needed to deal with this critical situation. Sometimes we can succeed in turning our aggressive energy from destructive into constructive action.