

Most all of us at some points get angry, and indeed anger has a place. There can be justified anger. And there is the emotional anger we can't control that crops up, such as when we have a bad day, or maybe are watching sports, or dealing with heavy traffic. The question is do we, as we hear in our first reading "hug them tight?" For when we do, what we find is they don't lead to much happiness at all, but rather they begin to take over our souls and turn us into people we do not want to be. What if though we were to take a healthier view towards wrath and anger, and even take it a step further by striving to forgive those with whom we were angry? What we might find is something that is far more fulfilling: namely peace in our hearts and souls, and a better world because of it.

In 1980, at the age of 14, TJ Leyden became a neo-Nazi skinhead, soon rising through the ranks of Hammerskin Nation, the largest white supremacist transnational organization in America. After 15 years of spreading hate, bigotry and racism, TJ turned his back on the white power movement.

In his own words as he shares his story, he writes that in his home, he was taught that boys don't cry, men rule and women are second-class citizens.

So when his mother tried to talk him out of getting involved in the white power movement, he wouldn't listen to her.

Later he joined the US military where he started recruiting. TJ developed strong bonds with gang members inside the military and when he left he joined the largest neo-Nazi skinhead organization in the country as a street soldier. At first he didn't really like the violence but after a while it didn't bother him one bit; it was just something they did. Looking back, he says he wouldn't even be able to tell you how many victims he had.

The gang gave him everything he lacked – identity, purpose, a direction in life. He felt a complete sense of right because he was preserving his identity and his culture. The gang he was in felt under attack from blacks, from Latinos and from multiculturalism in general. They set the rules and there was no room for dissent: dialogue was a sign of weakness. In the early 90s TJ married a girl in the white supremacy movement. He figured he was in love, and since they were both so good at hating, why not raise kids to hate like they did. His first kid was two days old when TJ first went to prison and for the next ten years he was in and out of jail.

When the change finally came it was a series of epiphanies, he says. The first epiphany happened when he was watching a Caribbean-style children's show with his sons, and his younger son – then aged three – suddenly just switched off the TV announcing, 'Daddy! We don't watch (using the "N" word! 'At first TJ felt proud that he was turning into a racist like him, but then he started thinking.... if he himself wasn't raised to be a racist and had turned out the way he was, then how much worse would his children be! And then it hit him – if he didn't want his sons to grow up to be like him, there must be something fundamentally wrong with the whole premise and purpose of his life.

Slowly TJ began to think beyond the black and white rhetoric of his group. He began to imagine what might happen if the whole world was white. Would we then be saying, 'We're going to get rid of all non-racist pagans, ' or, 'Everyone with a genetic defect is the next to go. 'Finally, it got to a point where he had to choose which path of life he was going to take.

When he decided to get out of the movement, he went first to his mother's house to apologize for everything he'd put her through. The next morning she suggested TJ visit the Simon Wiesenthal Museum of Tolerance in LA,

to apologize to them. He thought she was crazy but she was so persuasive. So he rang them and said, 'My name is TJ. I've got all this racist literature and material and I want to hand it over to you. 'They were flabbergasted but invited him along. He learnt later that he was the first neo-Nazi to voluntarily and publicly give up the movement and hand over racist material and evidence.

At that first meeting the rabbi was hesitant, but ten days later he invited TJ back. He was asked if he'd speak out about his friends in the white power movement and TJ agreed. What was amazing he says was that for the first time in his life here was a group of individuals who honestly believed he could do good in the world. For the first time he says he experienced real compassion. In fact the greatest compassion he says he's ever experienced is when he spoke at a synagogue and a Jewish Holocaust survivor came up to him and said they forgave him.

The easiest thing for TJ he says was to give up racism, because it's an 'ism 'and people change isms all the time. The harder thing was to give up his sense of power, entitlement and privilege. He used to think people were

showing him respect, until eventually he came to realize that the only reason they were showing him respect was because they feared him.

These days, as he is still active in speaking out against hate and racism, he continues to receive death threats all the time, and there are websites on the internet targeting him as well. But he is undeterred in trying to be an agent of peace.

Sirach gives us practical advice, because while most of us might not be in a neo-Nazi group, for all of us anger can get out of control.

Again, there is the emotional kind of anger that comes and goes just as quickly. But then there is the choice to act on anger; to ruminate, to stoke the flames of it, and to let it become a way of life that turns into constant outbursts, or a simmering hatred for others, or a frequent mistreatment of people. Anger is related closely to the deadly sins of pride and envy, and the three it has been said form an unholy alliance. The challenge for us is to recognize it, to do something about it, and to also remember that forgiveness as we hear in our first reading and Gospel can be so liberating for ourselves and one another.

A starting point is to try to look at when anger is becoming sinful. Fr. Thomas Morrow, a Dominican priest who is a moral theologian who wrote “Overcoming Sinful Anger”, points out that “Anger as a deadly sin is ‘a disorderly outburst of emotion connected with the inordinate desire for revenge.’ . . . It is likely to be accompanied by surliness of heart, by malice aforethought, and above all by the determination to take vengeance.” He cites things that we can see as red flags and are the dysfunctional ways of dealing with anger. One is passive aggressive behavior. Sometimes we can do that and be angry but not show it directly; instead a person shuts down; they agree to do something but never does. According to Dr. Daniel K. Hall-Flavin of the Mayo Clinic, specific signs and symptoms of passive-aggressive behavior include: resentment and opposition to the demands of others, complaining about feeling under-appreciated or cheated, procrastination, stubbornness, inefficiency, memory lapses, sullenness, irritability, and a cynical or hostile attitude. Passive-aggressiveness can also entail giving someone the silent treatment; they think “I won’t get angry I’ll get even” and a person refuses to talk to someone because they are unhappy with their behavior. It indicates bad communication skills and

immaturity; it's sinful; and it solves of course nothing. Sometimes passive aggressive people do things to irritate the other person.

There's also exploding with anger. A person may have outbursts that become common. Sometimes they blame the other person for "making them angry" when in fact they are just refusing to look in the mirror. Sadly there are many families where this kind of anger is common.

Then there is perpetual anger; a person who is perpetually bitter. They bring up the past all the time, in particular the sins of others who wronged them. Fr. Morrow uses the example of a wife who was intending to leave their husband and would load him down with e-mails enumerating his failures of the past. It's a sad way to live; sometimes people bring up old issues, especially in a marriage, which is what every marriage counselor warns against. "You made me suffer in the past, so I'll make you pay for the rest of your life." Forgiveness (more on that in a second) can become a foreign concept.

Anger is one of those things that can creep up, and something we need to identify by listening to our conscience and also seeking advice and counsel from friends and family if we sense it's getting a little out of hand.

With respect to anger, a starting point is to identify what is really driving it. In TJ's case, it was fear of losing power over others. Anger is often self-centered, impatient with the weaknesses of others and often driven by an sense of entitlement rising up in response to real or imagined injury. It causes the breakdown of marriages, families, and friendships. Sometimes a person is also angry at themselves for the decisions they've made or a life situation, or angry one person such as a boss or coworker but then takes that out on other such as loved ones at home. Sometimes what drives anger is a fear like TJ had of losing one's place in the world; in his case it was perceived encroachment from people of other races. A person who is dealing with anger may be afraid they'll lose their place in the world, or fear loss or lack of love, or fear that their real or imagined rights are under attack. At times they fear suffering and are worried about surviving in a dog-eat-dog world. As TJ experienced a perversion of the saying "the best defense is a good offense" by trying to make others feel fear and



intimidated, so often the person filled with anger can do this too. Once we identify it's cause, we can work on overcoming it.

Third, there is the healthy way to treat anger, which is through prayer, talking through things, and forgiveness. When we sense anger is an issue, we ask for God's help to overcome it. We take practical steps, such as once we know it's cause, we then work to let go of things such as perhaps a need for power or to control others. Or take a few deep breaths, or go for a walk to the gym. And we communicate. Some things we have to let go of; your candidate might not have won the election; your favorite team might have lost; you might have been passed over this time for a promotion. Does it do much good to cling to the anger though? Of course. not. But other times we can do something about the anger in particular with another person. How often we can be angry with someone that can lead to a blow up. But before the blow up, maybe a better path is to talk through things with someone. There may be a legitimate reason for anger; a person didn't follow through on something they promised they would do; they lied to us; they are perpetually late, or misused funds in a joint account. Whatever it may be, if we really love the person and want a relationship with them, we need to talk through things. We apologize if we were hurtful in our choices

or our temper got out of hand. We listen to the other person without talking over them. We compromise. We show tolerance while at the same time trying to state why we feel as we do. This is rediscovering if you will what an actual argument is like; not yelling but making a case and listening to the opposing viewpoint. Sometimes, especially say in faith and morals when talking about issues the Church teaches on, you might still be at odds, in particular with someone over political beliefs. But often what happens is when you have a discussion about something going on between you and another person, you'll come to a better understanding and most importantly find that it's really not worth jeopardizing the relationship because you are upset about something that in the grand scheme of things isn't a huge deal.

Fourth, of course some things are a huge deal. All of us are wronged; and sometimes a person can't continue a relationship. But so many relationships are ruined because a person refuses to forgive. But then you have what happened to TJ; people whom he at one point hated because they were simply Jewish instead embraced him, and when he was forgiven by a holocaust survivor who welcomed him, that in part inspired him to pass on what he was given. What a beautiful thing forgiveness is. It's not

easy; but when we are wronged, it's important to pray about the situation, asking for God's help to work through it; to acknowledge we were wronged and that it is OK to have feelings of anger and frustration; and then to strive to work towards forgiveness through talking to the other person, maybe even having a meeting with a third party to mediate, to try to listen and work towards reconciliation. There are also times where maybe the person and you don't have a relationship any more; or that person just does not want to talk or can't see that they have wronged you. By still trying to forgive and move past it, you don't let that person have power of you anymore. And this also goes for ourselves too. How often we can be the ones who are hardest to forgive; we forget we aren't superhuman. We have bad days; we let loved ones down, we do stupid things, we make mistakes, Let us also never forget Jesus never stops loving and forgiving us. But with that, we also need to share that forgiveness we have been given with those who have wronged us too.

Lastly, let us never forget the example we are for others, especially for kids. Again most everyone has a bad day. But As TJ found out in his life, some of his home experiences shaped him. That's why with anger especially, we need to be aware what happens at home. If a child is seeing mom and dad

yell or there are constantly raised voices; if a child learns that racist language around the dinner table is OK, or that all Republicans or Democrats are all evil, or that God does not love people of some religions, these things shape them for the worse. As such just as a parent might have a young child take a time out or something when they fight with their brother, when a parent shows accountability, and says I should not have said that, or that was a mistake, they learn. So too do they learn when parents love one another, and use positive language, and lead by example. The point is anger is like a cancer; it spreads, and infects others, and we can never overlook that which is why it's so important to deal with it in a healthy way before the emotion becomes a sin.

All of us are aware of the anger that is all around us. And so often, it is so toxic; it leads to so many ruined relationships, and it destroys people. It's no way to live. Thankfully, we do not worship a God who is angry or out to get us, but a God who loves us through thick and thin, even when we sin. May we open ourselves to that love knowing how much we are cherished by the Lord, but also remember God loves those who have wronged us just as much as He loves us too. Letting emotional anger turn into hate and wrath will only lead to perpetual misery. Letting go of it and forgiving will

lead to peace and happiness. So let us strive to take that higher road, recognizing anger and hate when they come, and turning them over to God so we can be truly liberated and free, and use that freedom like TJ has done, to bring hope and love into the world and one another.