

GODLY ANGER AND BEYOND

By ROSEMARY HAUGHTON

THERE IS A STATE OF BEING now generally referred to as 'burn-out'. It afflicts especially people in 'human service'-type jobs who deal with the neediness of others, who are confronted day after day with damaged people, angry people, abused, beaten down and apathetic people. On the other hand they struggle with the smug, the indifferent, the dishonest, the exhausted and also with the truly evil. The burned-out are the ones who have tried to make a difference, and are daily confronted with the fact that the difference they make is miniscule and also extremely fragile—it can be undone by a new influence in the life of an individual, or by a shift of the political wind. The huge tide of evil seems, in the end, certain to sweep away whatever puny little sand-castles of hope and goodness have been raised.

'Burn-out' is a good phrase—it evokes well the sense that not much is left but ashes. But if there are only ashes—if one is indeed 'burned-out' then once there was fire, something was alight and alive and vivid. To burn out you have to burn, and the implication (and it is borne out by observation) is that the people who suffer from burn-out are the excited and exciting people, the ones with enthusiasm and hope and energy. They are also the angry people.

They are people driven by the kind of anger which can be called compassion, because real compassion is not just pity or sympathy, which are gentle though profound responses. Compassion, like pity, is a response to the perception of suffering. It may be an individual's hurt and pain, or the suffering of whole groups or nations, or the suffering of the earth itself, which moves to compassion. Pity feels the pain, grieves, reaches out in love, but compassion implies an element of analysis, and this is linked to anger. Compassion is the result not just of perceiving, but of judging that this evil should not be, and should be changed. There is anger that this has happened, but also anger at those who, on analysis, are perceived to have caused it or allowed it or denied it or could have helped and did not, or even could have been angry

and were not. In the case of 'natural' disaster, or in some kinds of theological climate where every disaster is interpreted as God's will, then anger is directed at God, as the responsible person. Compassion has, in fact, often motivated atheism.

It is the anger in compassion which makes it a force for change, and it is the same kind of anger which flares up at the perception of such things as cynical or dishonest or greedy government, business or Church. This anger is not exactly compassion because it responds directly not to the suffering but to the moral evil which, however, inevitably produces destruction, oppression and misery.

So burned-out people are people who have burned out with anger and compassion—the effectiveness of compassion being derived from its 'anger component'. The anger drove them to work to change the evil situation they perceived, and the anger galvanized other qualities they did not even know they had before they became angry: a dogged patience, a capacity for self-sacrifice and abnegation, an energy to learn new skills, a sharpened and focussed intelligence and a capacity for envisioning different possibilities and persuading others to share the vision. These people, in fact, are prophets—or have been prophets, until they got burned out. As prophets, they perceived the evil around them, understood its causes and denounced it, whether by word or by action. They grieved and raged over it, and they dedicated themselves to the destruction of the evil. They also envisaged, at least in outline, a different way of being and doing and held up an alternative, if only in their own minds.

(Before I go any further I had better acknowledge that the phrase 'burn-out' is now often used to describe mere boredom with a frustrating job or situation. There may be an element of anger here—if the job is of a kind that manifestly should not exist or should be done quite differently—but if there is real 'burn-out' then there must have been real burning. What happens to people in mindless and manifestly inhumane jobs is not burn-out but rot. And then there are the 'do-gooders'—the people who decide they know how to put other people right, and find the other people are not about to be put right according to their plans, and so they become discouraged and give up. But they never had any real compassion in the first place. In this article I am talking about people who have really *burned*, so are really burned out.)

These who become 'burned out' are the prophetic people, and while they burn they inspire others with their vision, they support

them with their enthusiasm. Their anger was fuel for real change. Theirs is an anger that we recognize when we read the gospels, and encounter a man who was outraged by what was being done to the poor of his time, bitter at the betrayal of the true values of his religious heritage by a grasping and cynical religious establishment, a man who agonized over the misery and hopelessness he saw around him. He was a man whose rage of compassion was founded on a very accurate social analysis, and issued not only in an outpouring of immediate healing and personal liberation but in the creation of an alternative model of relationship between believers and between God and humankind—a spectacle which so threatened the religious authorities that they decided to kill him.

This same fire of anger has burned in all the great heroes and heroines of faith who have responded to the evil of their time with practical compassion and with a vision of a different way, an alternative structure of human relationship. Their leadership kindled a fire of enthusiasm in others and changed history. In the three last centuries, it is true, the dualist religious climate of Catholic spirituality tended to regard anger as sinful, so the motivation was differently perceived—but words like ‘zeal’ or ‘spiritual fire’ described the same experience of prophetic power and energy. In women it was, of course, quite threatening. The stories of foundresses of religious congregations, or other women who were spiritual leaders, routinely tell of violent opposition from male clerics frightened out of their mediocre wits by the prophetic power of the women, and record the attempts to suppress it by both external pressure and internal ‘spiritual’ manipulation. The story of Cornelia Connelly is a good example of a ‘burning’ woman whose personal anger (not named but evident) and power of practical compassion upset the smug clerical patriarchs of her time.

So when we are talking of burned-out anger we are talking about the apparent loss of perhaps the most powerful of all means to human liberation and the reign of God. Without Godly anger there is numbness, despair and the triumph of the principalities and powers which seem to have most of the other powerful motivations on their side: fear, greed, jealousy and the lust for power.

So when we think about ‘burn-out’ the implications are serious. What happens when anger ends? After years of faithful struggle, prayer, thought, planning, support of others, the flame burns low. Nothing much seems to have changed, friends and colleagues are concealing their doubts (not altogether successfully), the drained

emotional energy does not seem to be replenishing itself automatically as it once did. Most importantly, the fiery conviction that all the effort is worthwhile and ultimately effective is undermined. The sense of the huge power of evil in the world becomes more vivid and obvious, and can no longer be kept at a distance by the energy of the work in hand. All the motives for anger are still there, and experience and knowledge have made these clearer than ever, but they seem more like reasons for despair than motives to keep fighting.

That is burn-out. The usual recipe for dealing with it is a change of job, specifically a change to one with little or no responsibility for people and decisions affecting people—at least in an obvious way. Social workers take jobs in real estate, therapists start small businesses, teachers go into computer technology. Or they take early retirement and grow vegetables. For immediate survival, some such change may be necessary, but what happens to the anger and the compassion? Are they to be dismissed as outgrown illusions? Is there some other way, some other explanation?

There are some people who do seem able to go on and go through. There are people who remain until death committed to work and the life to which the anger of compassion drove them. They survive failure and disappointment, betrayal by friends, even the destruction of their work, and somehow find a way to go on and create anew. It is easy to say that these are exceptional people, holy people, heroines, saints, not like us. To leave it at that is a cop-out. The question is too important to be left there; because we are talking about a huge number of prophetic and talented people whom the world cannot spare, but whom the world is doing its best to destroy.

Is there a theology and a spirituality which can illuminate a transition, a passage through burn-out, a way beyond the end of godly anger? Once we let go of a dualist, other-worldly theology, which copes with the problem of earthly failure and prevalence of evil putting its expectations of good beyond the grave and beyond the final cataclysm, we are left with not much except one or other version of liberation theology, and liberation theology has certainly fuelled the fire of many who burn with world-changing fire. But in its original forms it does not easily survive indefinite postponement of measurable liberation. Ironically, those who continue to work and suffer and wait, in situations such as El Salvador where oppression seems as successfully entrenched as ever, seem to operate

spiritually by a different kind of theology, one which certainly looks to the reign of God in earthly as well as heavenly terms, but which does not expect to see it break in within the lifetime of those who pray and suffer in it, or perhaps even within the lifetimes of their children. We are confronted with people who have moved beyond anger, not because anger is wrong—it is the essential thing that opens people up to new perception, new direction, and whole-hearted choices for something different—but because anger, like all flames, burns out.

You do not have to live in the Third World or in situations of extreme oppression to experience the need for a theology that makes sense beyond anger. Those of us who have made the radical choices to which anger and compassion impelled us have a great need for an alternative to cynicism, despair, or a kind of good-humoured doggedness which will not give up but dare not confront too clearly the reasons for going on.

Can we come up with something that might be called a theology of endurance? Endurance is not cynicism, it implies that there is something worthwhile to be gained by not giving in. It implies courage and hope. It can seem to be a 'cold' virtue because it can only have the strength to continue by not indulging in heroics or fantasy. It is a virtue linked to common-sense but also to honesty and fidelity; it makes a choice and sticks to it for as long as it takes. So although endurance may seem 'cold' it is perhaps the kind of superficial 'coldness' that not only conceals but preserves the essential warmth. In other words, if we pursue the metaphor of 'burn-out' we find that when the fire seems dead perhaps it is not. If nothing is done, the burned out ashes will indeed grow cold and dead, but this is not inevitable. As a housewife banks up the fire at night with turf or ash to keep the embers glowing underneath, so endurance preserves the warmth of compassion. The essential quality of anger is changed from flame to glow, and hidden in order to keep it burning. It is, in a sense, no longer anger. It is something more durable, and it is capable of supporting life and hope in hard and unencouraging circumstances. Even when it is hidden, perhaps scarcely felt, it is there and—to pursue the metaphor—it is capable of being blown into flame again when the time is right and, even more importantly, it can kindle a light for others.

A theology of endurance, like any theology, is founded in a perception of God's actions, reviewing the history of redemption

and trying to understand how it works. A theology of endurance has to ask questions about God's action (or inaction?) in the captivity of Israel in Egypt and in the fact that in all known historical times some human group or other has suffered such captivity and oppression. Where was God in all that time—or do we recognize God only in the moment of liberation—if it comes? We need to ask questions about God's action in the whole of creation, as human beings successfully destroy and dismantle the delicate ecosystems, raping and abusing the body of beautiful Gaia, and making her, too, a slave. We have to ask questions about that time in the life of Jesus when the tide of popularity had turned, when friends deserted and slander was striking and it was becoming obvious that the reign of God was not, after all, about to begin, as he had so confidently predicted. How did he think and feel? Had his relationship with the Abba changed? Did a different *theology* begin to emerge? We have hints, words, decisions. There was a change of pace, of direction, of style. There was endurance rather than anger, a new awareness of the place of suffering, a vision beyond it which only symbols could express. We can only guess, but the guesses are important.

We need to ask questions too, about the Church, about the predominance in its history of greed, oppression, stupidity, timidity, the desire to hold on to power, and the fact that the outbreaks of truth and love and vision have been real, and are indeed the justification for continuing somehow to call it 'holy', but they have been historically brief in comparison, and always encompassed by threats and fears which often destroyed them. Where was God in all this? Where is God now, as the outbreak of compassion and anger which Vatican II generated is steadily suppressed, Church people lose their jobs and their hope, and a whole generation of Catholics that had begun to claim responsibility and dignity finds both snatched away? Cynicism and despair are common reactions. Is there an alternative? Is there a way to perceive the action of God in endurance without compromise?

A theology of endurance is founded in the bitter realities of history, in which evil is usually and routinely in the ascendant, while good manages only to maintain itself and to refuse to be extinguished. It is founded in the reality of the earth, in which pain and beauty are intertwined and death is essential for the continuance of life. In a short article I do not intend even to begin to work out what such a theology might look like when examined.

But a theology is a body of thought, and it implies rather than expounds a way of life. What, then, does a *spirituality* of endurance look like? How do people live in faith beyond anger?

The answer to this question proposed here is very personal. The experience of a need for a spiritual 'way through' in the face of the kinds of experience I have discussed is (or perhaps becomes at certain points) universal, but the ways of coping with that need are various, as indeed I have suggested already. Therefore, my suggestion here is not particular to me, but neither is it (so far at least) an accepted 'spirituality'. And yet it has long roots.

Some years ago, preparing for a lecture in a series dedicated to Thomas Merton, I found myself reflecting on the experience of burn-out as a kind of spiritual 'dark night', which could perhaps be confronted with the help of such a description, and perceived as a spiritual experience which could be valuable and fruitful. Later, I was sent a book called *Women's spirituality*, (edited by Joann Wolski Conn and published in 1986) in which an excerpt from a book of mine had been included. I put it on the shelf after merely a cursory reading. Only recently I pulled it off the shelf and discovered in it an essay called 'Impasse and Dark Night', which explored the experience of life when everything seems purposeless and futile, and energy and (it seems) hope have faded. The author, Constance Fitzgerald, explores this idea especially in terms of the experience of women, and although obviously the experience of 'impasse', 'burn-out' and 'dark night' are common to men and women, the focus on women is valid, not only because it concerns women in a special way but because understanding how women experience it casts light on the nature of the phenomenon itself.

As Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza has said, 'We have only begun to experience the depth of women's alienation from Christian belief systems', and the reason for this, as Constance Fitzgerald suggests, is that

their past religious experience has come to them through these [patriarchal and masculine] images and this inherited symbol system, which does not function now as it did before. There is no going back to what was—but there is no satisfactory going forward either. There seems no way out of the God-less situation.

For many women, there was indeed a kindling of godly anger inspired by those symbols which were presented as universal, but

in the pursuit of the work towards which that anger impelled, they discovered that women were only marginally included in what those symbols seemed to promise. Godly anger was quenched by the sense of betrayal and bitter humiliation and a kind of self-hatred that grew from a sense of having cooperated in one's own deception. There was no going back, yet a deep grief for what was lost. So the enthusiasm and energy which were ignited by the old symbols were burned out, yet the people and the experiences that fuelled the fire are still there; the world still needs healing, the power of evil is no less strong.

For a woman, a spirituality which can come through such a dark night, when godly anger seems impossible because the old symbols of God have become symbols of alienation, has to do with the ancient feminine task of keeping the embers alight. In the tradition of the Scottish Isles, as in many other places, there is a special invocation which the woman of the house is to recite as she covers over the fire with ash and traces on the hearth the signs of blessing. It is her last task of the day thus to ensure the safety and warmth of the home through the cold night.

That is what a spirituality of endurance has to be about. It is the work of right-brain people, especially at times when the energy of the left-brain people has been destructive because of its arrogant and ignorant self-confidence. The people who grieve and ache in the death of anger, because the energy of anger manifestly is not working any more, have to turn to the tasks of endurance.

It is perhaps still possible that the earth can be recovered as a home for all the creatures which swarm and struggle across her body. If that is so it will only happen because, now, there are some who have passed through the end of anger, have experienced the night of 'impasse', and have decided, even in a bleak and stolid kind of way, not to give up, but to draw the symbols of blessing in the ashes and keep the embers alive until morning. This is done in all those places where people work to preserve or create 'hearths' which are the centres of homes—places where people treat each other with justice and compassion because they are family and belong in the land which is entrusted to them to cherish. These 'homes' can be large—they can even be small nations (though they are such a threat to the other nations that operate by ensuring an underclass that they are not likely to last). But mostly they are small. They are places of refuge for the damaged and the fearful, places where people learn new courage,

places where beauty is created and shared. They are houses for abused women, they are small businesses where the workers and the work have a dignity and a hope, they are farms where unpoisoned food is grown and animals are regarded as living beings and not food-machines. They are shops that sell honest goods and churches that care more for the 'little ones' than for their investments and their collections. They are people who plant gardens and share them, and people who make music and drama and all kinds of art. They are people who work to provide health care rather than sickness care. They are all the people who work in inhuman institutions and support each other in efforts to make them more human. They are striking coal miners and their wives in Virginia, enduring and singing in the face of corporate violence. They are families where children learn to care and to be angry and to see even beyond the anger.

This is the work of endurance, and it is the hope that keeps warm under the ashes. But what preserves that warmth, hidden and unnoticed, is the prayer of endurance. Like the traditional description of the 'dark night' it does not seem like prayer at all. It seems more like giving up praying, or just going through the motions. It seems to be little more than a refusal to give up.

From a woman's point of view it has to do with the realization that the brave anger has gone beyond recall because its vital symbols have failed; they have broken their promises and can no longer ignite godly anger. Yet there is a conviction that that is not the whole story. As yet there is no way to rediscover the symbols or discover new ones. There is only search, and patient endurance. And that is enough. The only religious statements that make sense are apophatic ones, indeed the prayer of endurance is a kind of apophatic journey, but it is not passive, it finds expression, as I suggested, in all kinds of work which has to do with the preservation of goodness and beauty and compassion on however small a scale. It is not that all the people who do the kind of things I mentioned above (and all the others I did not mention) are thinking of themselves as moving 'beyond anger' and consciously committed to the work of endurance. Indeed many of them are truly experiencing godly anger and the great energy of joy which is in that. But all of them are in touch at some level with the great need to preserve these 'hearths' of warmth against the encroaching cold. And the commitment to this is, in itself, an act of courage and love, a powerful rejection of the claims of evil which work so well

to be accepted as the obvious and only way to go. And so there is indeed a prayer of endurance at work, and its power is incalculable.

The realization of this possibility of endurance is especially important for women, because we experience ourselves moving beyond anger, and we know the reasons for that, and we know the danger of cynicism and despair, the withdrawal which is a defence against the intolerable truth of betrayal. It is possible that women's willingness to move beyond anger into an apophatic darkness which is active and indeed very efficient and effective will also give courage to men who experience something of the same but perhaps do not so easily recognize that the old symbols have betrayed them also, since the symbols are, after all, masculine ones. However that may be, women have first to confront their own loss of godly anger, and enter into the way of endurance, tracing in the ashes of the hearth the signs of faith, and invoking ancient spirits to preserve the family until morning comes.