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Why Are Those Women So Angry?

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Until quite recently, I dismissed criticisms of "angry feminists" as a sexist stereotype. I was tired of hearing people say, "I believe in equal pay for equal work, but I dislike those bra-burning feminists!" Perhaps I'm too young, but almost all of my friends are feminists, and I have yet to meet anyone who has burned her bra, so this comment always strikes me as bizarre. However, recently I have begun to think seriously about the power of stereotypes and the ability of people to disregard messages they do not want to hear. I now realize that feminists need to be careful not to unnecessarily reinforce the angry feminist stereotype if they hope to be heard.

My grown son, Eric, has long tried to convince me that feminists would be more effective if they didn't have such an "attitude." I usually respond to my son and other critics by saying that women have *earned* the right to be angry. Besides, anger is a source of energy, and certainly a better response to oppression than self-flagellation, alcoholism, or depression. Too many of us, particularly Caucasian and Asian women, have been taught that it is better for us to always be smiling and "nice," but as the suffragettes learned, there are times when the only way to change an unjust situation is through anger or confrontation. However, because of recent experiences in which I have been the person in the privileged position, I am beginning to wonder if my son might be right about how counterproductive anger can be.

I began to think about anger because of a series of incidents involving an African-American graduate student. If anyone deserves to be angry, this woman does. Through intelligence, perseverance, and hard work she has overcome more difficulties than I will ever face. She still hears enough racist and sexist remarks to continue to fuel her anger.

However, her expectation that she will always be discriminated against and must always fight for her rights sometimes turns out to be a self-fulfilling prophecy. For example, as Graduate Program Director I attempted to help her get a good start in the graduate creative writing program. I had suggested that she attend our annual literary festival and introduce herself to one of the creative writing professors she would probably study with, a famous poet. Unfortunately, she chose to approach this poet five minutes before a poetry reading. The teacher was collecting her thoughts and planning her reading. In response to the student's request, "Could I talk to you for a moment," the distracted poet responded, "I'm a bit busy right now." Feeling rebuffed, the student angrily replied, "Well, I'm busy, too!" and stalked off. At this point, both student and professor had an attitude, one because she felt she had been accosted by an aggressive stranger right before a reading and the other because her attempt to meet a white professor had been rebuffed. As a result, she never did take a class from this teacher.

As I thought about this and other incidents in which a person has complicated her life with her anger, I wondered if my feminist anger has also prevented me from understanding situations from another person's perspective. By interpreting the situation as sexist, have I left myself no room for

negotiation or perhaps unknowingly made future situations more difficult for myself and other feminists?

Another experience that made me think about anger occurred at a conference workshop on the subject of including gay, lesbian and bisexual perspectives in university classes. I attended, hoping to get some new readings and ideas for my classes. As the workshop progressed, there was a great deal of discussion about the insensitivity of well-meaning straight academics. The gay and lesbian participants were angry at the dominant culture, and I was a representative of that culture. I knew enough stories of verbal and physical violence against homosexuals that I understood why the people in this workshop were angry.

However, that understanding didn't prevent me from becoming more and more defensive as the workshop progressed. After all, I had willingly come to learn. Now I was being told that supposedly open-minded types like me were actually worse than the bigots. I realized that this was how some of the men in my women's studies courses must feel, and, like one man who listened for only ten minutes, I wanted to announce "I'm in the wrong place!" and leave. I had come to the workshop as a "straight person of good will," but my mildest questions were answered with hostility and condescension.

One reason the workshop was so painful was the fact that I, a lifelong liberal, was forced to confront my own ignorance and smugness. At the point in the workshop where people were asked what activities they had used successfully to introduce a gay perspective, I described an activity I had used several times. In one of my undergraduate linguistics classes I asked students to attend some activity of a group whose perspective they knew they would disagree with; they later had to write a description of themselves from the point of view of that group. I have had a lot of interesting responses to this assignment: animal lovers who visit hunt clubs, pro-life students who go to pro-choice meetings, and even a few Baptists or Catholics who daringly attend a Methodist or Unitarian church service. A few students, including those who put the assignment off until the last possible moment, attended a meeting of the student gay and lesbian caucus. They generally reported having some anxiety before attending, but were surprised to learn that gay and lesbian students had worries about papers and exams, as well as worries about hate speech and harassment.

My workshop co-participants were not impressed with my activity, and my contribution was followed by an embarrassed silence. Several participants said they thought that my assignment was arrogant and condescending, and that members of the gay and lesbian caucus probably resented having the straight students come to their meetings. With a rush of shame, I realized that they could be right. The deep feeling of humiliation I experienced did not make me eager to attend any more gay and lesbian workshops, and since that conference, I have passed up several other opportunities. I wondered how many men had left my women's studies classes vowing never again to submit themselves to the humiliation of being an oppressor when they had elected to take a women's studies class. Change is always painful, but perhaps it is less so if those on the high moral ground have more

empathy for those finding themselves in the role of the oppressor.

As I begin to understand my own unearned privileges, I continue to realize how difficult it is for me to recognize and change the attitudes that accompany these privileges. It never seems to get easier. My most recent consciousness-raising experience was as a volunteer organizer for a conference on women and language. I was assigned the responsibility of arranging American Sign Language (ASL) interpreters for a Deaf college student who wished to attend the conference. I sent a brief e-mail message to the student asking her what sessions she would attend and what she would require for the conference. In response, I received a three-page letter from her lawyer outlining the legal responsibilities of the organizers. The letter also requested (demanded?) a description of how the conference organizers planned to meet these responsibilities. Somewhat taken aback, I attempted to arrange ASL interpreters through the university where the conference was to be held. I sent another e-mail message to the student asking her when she would arrive and which activities she would be attending, a not unreasonable request, since the per-hour cost of the two interpreters was substantial. Several days passed with no response from the student.

Finally I contacted the lawyer saying I had hired interpreters but had been unable to make final arrangements because the student had not sent me a schedule of her plans. That day I received a message from the student saying she had been too busy to respond to my previous messages. However, she did find time to write me a long message pointing out my insensitivity to Deaf culture. I had failed to capitalize the word *Deaf*, and used the words *signer* and *translator* rather than *interpreter*. I decided that this student had an attitude, and at that point, I did, too.

Using my own arguments about feminism, I would have to admit that this Deaf student had earned the right to be angry. She was born into a hearing society, and she is generally labeled "handicapped." Although there are laws and services which allow her to participate, the fact that she felt the need to immediately have her lawyer contact me suggests that she has met resistance in the past; in this case, conference organizers were suddenly faced with the reality that more than half of our budget had to be used pay for the cost of interpreters.

This Deaf student's methods of communication through a formal letter from her lawyer, her non-response, and her condescending response to my admittedly inaccurate questions all made me very angry. I had attempted in good faith to arrange for her participation in the conference, but, throughout the process, found myself on the defensive not only in dealing with her, but in attempting to make the arrangements. I felt I was entering a hostile culture, where I not only didn't know the rules, but also could be sued if I didn't learn them quickly. I who had been crusading against sexual harassment for so many years finally could understand the confusion and hostility of men who felt that they might inadvertently do something that might be interpreted as sexual harassment.

None of these experiences has changed my commitment to feminism. However, they have made me more sensitive to possible reasons for some of the backlash. As I think back to experiences in which I have been one of the oppressors, but one who is willing to learn and change, I realize that

it's much easier for me to change my behavior when the person from the oppressed group is not self-righteous, does not chastise me, and perhaps even has some understanding of how painful a change of attitude can be. As a feminist, it is important for me to remember that most people do not set out to be oppressors. It is usually the overall system that needs to change, a system of values and beliefs held and reinforced by both men and women. As Pogo in the old comic strip used to say, "We have met the enemy and it is us."