

ASSISTANCE TO THE ASSISTANTS

When Hate Becomes Contempt

As young children my sister and I would often get into fights in the back seat of the car. After maternal correction was administered, from the driver's seat, quickly came the plaintiff plea, "*he started it.*" Later on as a teen I worked in our family's bakery, surrounded by male relatives and employees. A correction was given by my uncle to an employee that was easily heard (even meant for us all), "*what makes you do the things you do.*"

The emotion of anger is in all of us, and is often perceived as a negative emotion. If it's righteous anger, its social purpose is not to drive others away but rather to remove problematic elements of a relationship and bring people back together. ("*Beat Them or Ban Them: Social Functions of Anger and Contempt,*" *Social Psychology* 93, #1, 103-15).

So what about the current moment, what we face today? Let us examine the motive! We allow ourselves to get angry first of all because we recognize that things are not as they should be, and we want to set them right, and we think we can. Being motivated by hate leads to something far worse: contempt. While anger seeks to bring someone back into the fold, contempt seeks to exile. It attempts to mock, shame, and permanently exclude from relationships by belittling, humiliating, and ignoring. Anger says "I care about this." Contempt says, "You disgust me. You are beneath caring about."

You and I can both agree that there is a lack of respect in public discourse. We see one side thinking they are better than the other side, one race better than the other race. On and on it goes. This "*us versus them*" hits us right between the eyes, to not respond with understanding and compassion.

Contempt makes it impossible for people of opposing views to work together. When we treat others as enemies, we lose friendships, love, and happiness. Isn't this what's happening in our culture? Sarcasm, sneering, hostile humor effectively say that the other person is worthless when we should love that person more than any other.

Contempt drives people apart and makes people miserable. Love for our friends and contempt for our enemies -- we cannot have it both ways. Dr John Gottman gives us four rules ("*Marital Dissolution and Stability*," *Journal of Family Psychology* 7, #2, 57-75):

1. Focus on other people's distress, and focus on it empathetically. Listen to them respectfully. Try to understand their point of view before offering your own. Never listen only to rebut.

2. in your interactions with others, particularly in areas of disagreement, adopt the "five-to-one rule," five positive comments for every criticism.

3. No contempt is ever justified, even if, in the heat of the moment, you think someone deserves it. It is unjustified more than you know, it is always bad for you, and it will never convince anyone that he/she is wrong.

4. Go with people who disagree with you and learn from them. That means making new friends and seeking out opinions you know you don't agree with.