

# Righteous rage

by [Kathleen Norris](#) in the [May 3, 2003](#) issue

*The Enigma of Anger: Essays on a Sometimes Deadly Sin.* By Garret Keizer. Jossey-Bass, 363 pp., \$22.95

Provocative, thoughtful and supremely useful, this book is a brave expedition to a place most of us would rather not go, the seat of our anger. Keizer is attempting nothing less than to restore anger to its proper place within Christian tradition as a God-given gift for combatting injustice and evil, a gift that turns into sin when we use it for any other purpose. I found the book to be a healthy and much-needed antidote to a slew of cultural orthodoxies: that we can "rise above" anger; that it's a "problem" to be solved, or talked out in therapy; that it is "always tied to an objective cause," and if we can just eliminate or escape from that cause, we can be at peace. These comfortable lies, Keizer asserts, are nothing less than a denial of our essential humanity as created in the image of God.

The book is laced with pithy observations that not only resonate with my own experience but push me toward a new understanding of my behavior, and that of other, sometimes angry people. A few examples: "Anger is often nothing more than a hasty judgment registered as a nasty emotion," "The recent phenomenon of road rage is a good example of the anger that results from exaggerated subjectivity," "Anger is constructive only to the extent that fear is reasonable," and my favorite, "Anger outbursts are the result of grief that never comes to sobbing." But these quotes can't do justice to the breadth and depth of this book. The contents page makes it clear that we are asked to consider anger in all its many guises: "Anger in the Lord," "Anger in the Head," "Anger in the House," "Anger in the Church" and "Anger in the World."

Under the heading "Anger in the Lord" we consider "The Wrath of God," "Christ the Tiger" and anger as sin. Under "Anger in the Head" Keizer discusses anger as fear, as privilege, as grief and as grace. Only a misapplied sense of entitlement, Keizer believes, allows us to use anger as a substitute for character, and feel superior when we assign blame. (Blaming, he wryly observes, is the second great sin of the human

race.) We recognize anger as grace, he notes, when we can thank God for the gift of anger that makes us justifiably fed up with unjust, oppressive or evil realities.

Keizer pushes even further here, into the meaning of the incarnation itself "as a highly refined expression of the wrath of God, the force that cleaves the rocks, parts the waters, and ultimately breaches the barrier between the human and the divine."

All good and well for God, we may respond. But what are we to do with our own God-given wrath, which is so inextricably bound up in our selfishness, fear and sin? To help us find the answer, Keizer turns to the fourth-century desert monks, who found that anger had come with them into the desert, and contended mightily with it, ultimately concluding, as Keizer puts it, that "sometimes people are angry because they care about what they are doing." In providing evidence that even justifiable anger leaves damage in its wake, Keizer turns to literature, to angry men and women such as Saul, Agamemnon, Clytemnestra, Medea and characters in the novels of Thomas Hardy, Toni Morrison and Russell Banks.

I applaud Keizer's attempt to "redeem testosterone," which, like anger, is created by God, who leaves it up to us how to use it for good or ill. And I appreciate his assessment of Sethe, the woman in Morrison's *Beloved*, who murders her infant rather than see her brought up a slave. She and her wrath are beyond our judgment, Keizer writes, adding that she teaches us that God "is the only absolute capable of standing between us and our misguided fury."

In a section titled "Anger in the House" Keizer examines the terrible paradox implied in the phrase "domestic violence" and offers wise reflection on the subject of children and anger. Children, he observes, learn how to be angry from adults, and they need to be taught that "emotions are not misdeeds," that it is wrong to deliberately provoke another person to anger, and that anger, even justifiable anger, always comes at a price.

On the subject of forgiveness, Keizer is nothing less than brilliant. All too often, he complains, we moralize and "presume to forgive someone for causing someone else to suffer." Before we can think of forgiving a bully or someone who has done us wrong, we need, Keizer insists, to thank God for the grace to be angry, and recognize that forgiveness is for our own good as well as for the offender. But forgiveness, like anger, is not an act of will. It is, he writes, "not the end of anger, but its transformation." Here, as so often in this book, Keizer returns to solid

theological ground, commenting that while "anger shows itself as an impulse to knock down walls . . . as forgiveness, it walks through walls--as the resurrected Christ is also said to have done."

Probably because I have recently been forced to contend with a group of people engaging in an appalling range of underhanded, duplicitous and malicious behaviors, I found Keizer's chapter on loving the enemy extraordinarily helpful. He confirmed what I had learned from hard experience, that simply "making nice" and pretending that "we're all friends here" does not work in this situation and begins to do harm. As Keizer writes, "The first logical step toward loving an enemy is admitting that you have one. Like the first logical step toward forgiveness--that of acknowledging that you have been wronged--this step comes as something of a liberation." It is anger, Keizer insists, that liberates us from our denial, and the prayer of forgiveness that makes anger no longer necessary.

But the question nags: how can I pray for my enemies? I need to be suspicious of my motives and keep a close watch on them, but if I truly love my enemy as I love myself, Keizer insists, I am not looking for self-aggrandizement or even victory, but a radical change of heart. It is love that impels me to pray for my enemy, while fully intending "to do everything in my power to oppose him. I intend to prevent his abuse from destroying us both."

This book has many such riches. Keizer's brutal honesty in admitting to his own anger, whether acted on or not, gives the book credence. A few of these admissions go on longer than necessary (at least for this reader), but they are important nonetheless, and Keizer is a great storyteller. This is a book that I intend to give to my friends. I ordered one for Valentine's Day for an attorney whose anger is often aroused in his advocacy for the elderly and poor in the face of bureaucrats, legislators and judges who are indifferent or worse. He found the book a blessing. Not an easy one, but probing, challenging, thorny and upsetting. The kind of blessing that comes from God, and that endures.