



The Struggle for Inner Peace

By Henry Brandt, Ph.D.

LESSON 4: WHAT YOUR EMOTIONS TELL ABOUT YOU

The Carters were discussing a friend whom they admired. "He is such a cheerful person; you always find him in a good mood."

As they talked, the telephone rang. Mrs. Carter answered it; when she hung up she said to her husband, "That was Cliff Brown. Alice had her baby last night—a girl, just what they wanted. Cliff is walking on air."

In describing a person's response to life—your own or someone else's—you speak of feelings and emotions. When looked at objectively, these tell much about the person. In your own case, you might well regard your emotions as guideposts on the route to self-discovery.

If your response to an unexpected change, a challenging idea, or just the daily routine is a positive one, you may use one or more of these words to describe your emotions: happy, cheerful, delighted, in high spirits, in a good mood, elated, thrilled, cordial, warm-hearted, enthusiastic, inspired, comfortable, glad, merry, pleased, joyful, overjoyed, gentle, affectionate, peaceful, long-suffering, meek, temperate, tender, forgiving, in accord, forbearing, genial.

But of course there is also a negative response. When in a good mood, Ted is a pleasant person to be around, but if you catch him when he's mad—look out!

"I can tell his mood by the way he shuts the door," his wife says. "If he nearly breaks the window in slamming it, I brace myself for his first gripe."

And come it will—followed by other complaints. "Why don't you make those kids keep their bicycles out of the driveway?" "Turn off that TV. There's racket enough around here without that thing adding to it!" "Women drivers! They should be kept off the highways after 3:00 in the afternoon!"

Negative responses such as these can cause much misery in life. Edward Strecker and Kenneth Appel have compiled a list of words that people use to describe anger:

When the presence of anger is detected in a person we say he is mad, bitter, frustrated, griped, fed up, sore, hot under the collar, excited (now don't get excited), seething, annoyed, troubled, inflamed, indignant, antagonistic, exasperated, vexed, furious, provoked, hurt, irked, sick (she makes me sick), pained (he gives me a pain), cross, hostile, ferocious, savage, vicious, deadly, dangerous, offensive.

Then, since anger is energy and impels individuals to do things intending to hurt or destroy, there is a whole series of verbs which depict actions motivated by anger: to hate, wound, damage, annihilate, despise, scorn, disdain, loathe, vilify, curse, despoil, ruin, demolish, abhor, abominate, desolate, ridicule, tease, kid, get even, laugh at, humiliate, goad, shame, criticize, cut, take out spite on, rail at, scold, bawl out, humble, irritate, beat up, take for a ride, ostracize, fight, beat, vanquish, compete with, brutalize, curse, offend, bully (*Discovering Ourselves*, Macmillan, pp. 114-115).

EMOTIONS AND PHYSICAL CHANGE

Whether the emotion is positive or negative, pleasant or unpleasant, it produces physical changes in the body that are familiar to everyone. The heartbeat increases; breaths are shorter; muscles grow tense; digestion is affected; a person perspires and undergoes glandular changes that put him on the alert.

Think what happens to a child when he becomes excited, particularly when the excitement continues over a period of time. Six-year-old John begged his father to take him to the airport. One night his father said he would take him the next day. How excited John became! After tossing in his sleep, he was awake bright and early. He could hardly sit through school, his body was so tense. He talked airport and airplanes to his schoolmates, his teachers, the traffic officer on the corner, to anyone who would listen.

About 5:00 that evening, he jumped up and down and clapped his hands when he saw his father drive up.

"Dad's here! Dad's here!" He whipped out of the house to the car. Before his father could get out, he asked, "We're still going, aren't we, Dad? Aren't we?"

"Of course we're going," his dad replied. John ran back into the house with a shout. He only picked at his supper. His body did not require much food under the circumstances.

Jan looked forward to a date with the young man she thought was the most popular in the entire school. All day long she was keyed up. Her appetite disappeared. Even her memory became faulty. Her mother had given her a chore to do that she forgot about due to her excitement over the date. Neither could she study.

The doorbell rang. She heard his voice. Her excitement was at a high point. Her heart began to pound, her hands to sweat. Her face flushed. Making a last check of makeup, she found that her hands trembled. She experienced evident bodily changes that brought a pleasant sensation.

Larry was elated. He had a date, doubling with a buddy and his girlfriend. He whistled and sang as he prepared to leave. His father had given him the car for the evening, and it had been no task at all to get it cleaned up for the occasion.

But when Larry drove in that night he was glum and disgusted. What had happened? His girl was late; the food bill was high; his friend and his friend's date got into an argument. The evening had been a flop. What a switch from the elation he had enjoyed as he was getting ready! His feelings had changed from pleasant to unpleasant, and so did his bodily functions.

You can easily see that emotions, whether pleasant or unpleasant, cause you to do something—jump up and down, sit and fret, pace the floor. The bodily changes, however, must return to normal for you to be comfortable and at ease. Where nature is not thwarted, this usually occurs with a minimum of effort. A child who has had an exciting day drops into his bed at night in sheer exhaustion.

With adults, letting nature take its course is often not so easily done. But returning to balance is no less essential for them than for children. Even the tenderest of emotions, pleasant as they are, must subside, allowing bodily processes to revert to normal.

IMPELLED TO ACT

The fact that an emotion may be pleasant does not make the quest for it desirable. The thrill of speed can be dangerous and deadly. The drive of sexual passion can throw you into deep trouble. Just the enjoyment of companionship can cause you to neglect important details and relationships in life.

It is the unpleasant emotions, however, that lead to the greatest troubles. The list by Strecker and Appel is unpleasant to read, but more so to experience. Unpleasant emotions impel you to act. In the case of anger, the impulse is to fight. The ultimate aim of fighting is to kill or destroy. Perhaps John had this in mind when he wrote: "Whoever hates his brother is a murderer" (1 John 3:15).

The difference between mild anger and murder is only a matter of degree. If you grant the truth of this, then you should consider anger and its related emotions as the deadliest cancers and treat them as such.

Of course it takes a lot of anger to carry out the impulse to harm someone. But who at some time has not thrown something in disgust? Watch two schoolboys fighting.

Neither means to stop till he has vanquished the other. Look at the newspaper headlines and you see that angry nations, movements, and ideologies are engaged in deadly struggles. James warned, "Where envy and self-seeking exist, confusion and every evil thing will be there" (James 3:16). For the man who treasures envy and self-seeking in his heart, the impulse to hurt or to destroy is not far off.

Observe a child long enough and you will see demonstrated the angry heart. One day I was a guest in a home where a three-year-old boy lived. To entertain him while my hostess prepared dinner, I gave him my billfold to play with. When he started removing the cards, I took it back from him. But this young fellow was not the type to easily give up something he wanted. First he begged me to give it to him. Then he said he wouldn't like me if I did not do as he wished. Seeing that neither approach worked, he threw himself to the floor and kicked his feet up and down. This too failed to move me. He went off into another room and sulked.

RULED BY WRATH

Karl Menninger, the noted psychiatrist, says, "However sweetly we may interpret the fact, the human child usually begins his life in anger...the cry of the child just born has the tone not of lamentation, but of wrath" (*Love Against Hate*, Harcourt, Brace, and World, p. 9).

Many people never lose this natural tendency toward anger. Wayne Hartley was an angry man. He moved from job to job because "worldly people" irked him. Finally he landed at a firm with a Christian president. Here was a man he felt he could work for; he looked forward to a happy relationship on the job.

But things did not turn out that way. Hartley was made general manager, having a number of foremen to supervise. One of the foremen used a great deal of profanity. One day Hartley could stand his talk no longer, so he called him aside and ordered him to refrain. The foreman paid no attention. So Hartley warned him again, "Stop it—or you'll get fired!"

The company president heard of Hartley's ultimatum. He called his general manager in. "Joe's got a foul mouth, I know," the president said. "But he gets more work out of his crew than any of our other foremen."

He told Hartley to leave the man alone. Hartley was not to impose his private standards on Joe or any other employee. Reluctantly Hartley accepted the president's directive. But from that day on, he felt he was constantly being overruled by the president. One day he stormed into the president's office, demanding a showdown.

"Am I the general manager or not?" he thundered.

"Why do you ask? Do you think you are the president?"

Wayne Hartley saw red. He shouted at his superior, waving his finger under his nose. He was completely angry—from the top of his head to the soles of his feet.

Telling of the incident later, Hartley said: "It takes a lot to get me mad, but when I am, the fur really flies. There we stood, toe to toe and nose to nose, yelling at each other. And both of us profess to be Christians. But you can be sure of this—no non-Christian ever made me more miserable than that man."

Did his boss cause Wayne Hartley to blow up?

"Who else?" Wayne demanded. "The last time he crossed me was the very last straw. I don't lose control of myself unless I'm forced to."

Here was a man who claimed to believe the Bible, which contains this verse: "God is able to make all grace abound toward you, that you always having all sufficiency in all things, have an abundance for every good work" (2 Cor. 9:8).

Could such grace be available to Wayne Hartley? Yes. First, however, he had to take an honest look at himself. When he did, he saw that he brought a spirit of antagonism to his new job. He didn't like to be crossed—whether by the foreman who violated his standard of speech or by the president who refused to let Wayne impose his standard on another. The frustration of not getting his own way exposed the wrath within him, just as frustration generally exposes the inner life of a man.

In looking back over his life, Wayne Hartley could see that he had possessed an antagonistic spirit since childhood. It had come out at home, at school, toward his wife, and his children, toward anyone who thwarted him. He did not blow up very often, but when he did, everyone got out of his way. He controlled things pretty well by simply threatening to blow up. At times, however, he met persons who just let him blow. This was true of the people he worked with; and this explained why he moved from job to job. By such moves he was able to dismiss his own problem, saying that his reasons for moving were the worldliness, selfishness, or cantankerousness of others. He always had a good reason for his tantrums.

The Bible says, "Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your wrath" (Eph. 4:26). What was Wayne Hartley doing? He was accumulating wrath day after day. He even denied that he himself had anything to do with it.

His situation could be likened to a sink with a dripping faucet. Put the plug in and the sink fills up. The next drop will cause the water to run over. Is it the last drop that spills the water onto the floor? No, it's the last drop plus all the rest of the drops. Wayne Hartley had an irritable attitude toward life. Tiny irritations at home, at church, at work, on the way to and from work all slowly accumulated. At the same time pressure was increasing. Usually he could work off some of the pressure and drain away some of the irritation. But occasionally he was trapped; the last drop, or "the last straw," would cause him to blow up.

For a long time he could not admit that he was an angry man. Therefore he had no need, no occasion, to pray for forgiveness or grace. He needed none, he told himself.

"I get along fine unless someone else is unreasonable," he said. "And is it my fault if someone else is unreasonable?" Yet the Bible says, "Do not let the sun go down on *your wrath*" (italics added).

When Wayne Hartley accepted the fact that the wrath was in *him*, he found help in dealing with it. And that is the good news for everyone filled with anger and malice and bitterness. The people in your life may never change their ways. Circumstances may be beyond your control. But fortunately you can do something about yourself. You can open your heart to God, who is able to fill it with bountiful grace. But whether you allow God to give you His grace is your decision.

Strangely, most persons who seek counsel will argue that they have the right to be angry. "Under my circumstances, can you blame me?" they will say in stout defense. Of course they have the *right* to be angry, but as long as they argue in defense of their wrath, they will see no need nor have any desire to change and thus be delivered from the unhappiness of anger.

Sometimes a person can ignore his anger by becoming preoccupied with a problem. Lois Flood is a case in point. "When I get up to sing in church, my chest tightens and I struggle for breath. I am afraid I will fail. Lately I've been overcome with a sense of inferiority."

But she was not inferior. She was, in fact, the best vocalist in the community. What then was wrong? A look backward revealed the church in which she sang had a policy that soloists should rotate Sunday by Sunday—the lesser singers taking their turns with the better. This meant that Mrs. Flood had opportunity to sing only a few times each year. It annoyed her to listen to those who were far less competent than she. When she did sing, it was to people who angered her.

She had another problem. A circle in the church excluded her because of her age. Though she tried hard to be a member of the group, she was not accepted—only reminded that she belonged in another circle. So whenever she sang, she sang to women who angered her.

Lois Flood was not an inferior woman, but she was angry, bitter, and resentful. Day after day, week after week, the sun went down on her wrath. When she looked at herself honestly and faced the truth, she dealt not with feelings of being inferior, but with her real problem—her selfish reactions to not getting her own way—and prayed for grace to accept what she could not change. She saw that up to this point she had had to give herself some reason for her uneasiness, and the reason she gave was, "I am inferior."

FEELINGS OF GUILT

Anger receives a great deal of attention in mental health clinics and counseling centers all over the country. So do guilt feelings. A mother feels guilty because she screams at her children. A young man feels guilty because he no longer adheres to the behavioral standards by which he was reared. Another youth has been involved very intimately with a girl and feels guilty, but cannot seem to help himself.

Some writers in the mental health field suggest that guilt feelings are the result of unreasonably high standards of conduct. People feel guilty because they are rejected or criticized. Therefore, they say, we need to accept one another as we are.

Commenting on this point, O. H. Mowrer, of the University of Illinois, says:

Our attitudes, as would-be therapists or helping persons, toward the neurotic are apparently less important than *his* attitude *toward himself*, [which] in the most general sense is a rejecting one. Therefore, we have reasoned, the way to get the neurotic to accept and love himself is for us to love and accept him, an inference which flows from the Freudian assumption that the patient is not really guilty or sinful but only fancies himself so . . . and that we are all inherently good and are corrupted by our experiences with the external world.

But what is here generally overlooked, it seems, is that recovery is most assuredly attained, not by helping a person reject and rise above his sins, but by helping him accept *them*.

This is the paradox which we have not at all understood and which is the very crux of the problem. Just so long as a person lives under the shadow of real, unacknowledged, and unexpiated guilt, he cannot (if he has any character at all) "accept himself"; and all our efforts to reassure him will avail nothing. He will continue to hate himself and to suffer the inevitable consequences of self-hatred. But the moment he (with or without assistance) begins to accept his guilt and his sinfulness, the possibility of radical reformation opens up; and with this, the individual may legitimately, though not without pain and effort, pass from deep, pervasive self-rejection and self-torture to a new freedom of self-respect and peace ("Sin, the Lesser of Two Evils," *The American Psychologist*, May 1960, p. 303).

The mother who blames herself for losing her temper with her children and the young people who are ashamed of their conduct are not, Mowrer would point out, struggling with imaginary guilt. Their guilt is real. They will find no relief from it till they face the truth and accept their sins as their own.

But to say, "I am like that," is going only halfway. Admission leads nowhere unless it implies a desire to change. It must mean that the mother sincerely wants help with her temper and the young people with their conduct, and that they turn to God for the help.

How precise 1 John 1:9 is on this point: "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." The man who confesses this way—having faith that God is able and willing to help him and having a desire for God's help—is well on the way to peace. The man who admits, "I'm like that," but does nothing about changing, will not find genuine inner peace. Nor will the man who denies responsibility for the wrong he knows he has done.

FREEDOM FROM FEAR

Another malady that plagues many people is fear. Strecker and Appel maintain that the causes of anger and the causes of fear are identical. In the case of anger, something has already happened. In the case of fear, there is the prospect that something will happen. This view makes these Bible verses come alive: "For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind" (2 Tim. 1:7). "There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves torment. But he who fears has not been made perfect in love" (1 John 4:18).

Again the key to freedom from fear is a backward look. Examine your reactions to people who may threaten you. Ask yourself, "Am I annoyed toward someone?" Lloyd Sterling was filled with vague fears. "I drive my tractor all alone in a field and find myself gripped with fear. A cold sweat breaks out and I tremble all over."

A study of his life brought out the answer to his problem. He was racked by smoldering hatred. He and a neighbor had quarreled over who would maintain a fence. He and his wife kept up a running battle over the discipline of the children. He was bitter toward a brother who was a better farmer than he.

Why was he afraid? Because he might lash out at his neighbor and lose the respect of the people in the community. In an angry moment in the house, he might harm the children or cause his wife to leave him. In his fierce competitiveness with his brother, he might make a rash business decision that could ruin his own livelihood.

Lloyd Sterling had reason to be afraid. Most people do. But the loving person is not afraid. If no immediate explanation for fear can be established, an inward look is necessary. What James wrote in his epistle may apply: "Where envy and self-seeking exist, confusion and every evil thing will be there" (James 3:16).

One further comment by Strecker and Appel:

Countless people at every corner unnecessarily deprive themselves not only of pleasure, but actual necessities in order to assuage the goading of

a troubled conscience and fulfill a need for punishment. Feelings of unworthiness, of undeservedness, result at every hand in conspicuous neglect of health, comfort, and peace of mind.

The man who, unprovoked, insults his best friend, the man who fails to show up at an important business conference, the girl who refuses an invitation to a party she would very much like to go to, the man who declines to propose to the girl he loves and remains unmarried, the woman who spends endless hours in unnecessary housekeeping drudgery "working her fingers to the bone," the brilliant man who insists upon engaging in a petty, monotonous routine, a drab, colorless existence, people who seem to court accidents, and have always a tale of hard luck, those who repeatedly make plans which seem inevitably to lead to failure—all may be motivated by guilt, the need for punishment or self-directed anger. Added to this are countless hours of sleepless worry, or self-recrimination, self-accusation, bitter regret, which also may be traced to the same sources (*Discovering Ourselves*, p. 132).

REVEALING WHAT'S INSIDE

Most people cause their own misery. Their guilt is not imaginary, but real. An inward look and a backward look can give the reasons and point the way to peace of mind. Yet such self-views are not easy to achieve. Man tends to flee from the truth about himself: "Men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil" (John 3:19).

When a man discovers hatred in his heart, he usually finds other disorders as well. His personality may resemble an iceberg. Perhaps only jealousy shows, or envy, or temper. But submerged are other disastrous emotions that deny him peace. And one emotion can hardly be dealt with singly; every evil deed must be exposed to the light. Yet to what surprising lengths people will go to avoid discovering that which may be "under their skins."

Some of these methods of avoiding what one discovers about himself will be discussed in the next three chapters.

Questions for review:

1. How would you describe the emotions you feel when things go your way?
2. On the other hand, how would you describe your feelings when your plans are thwarted, when people are difficult and hurtful or when you receive bad news?

3. Do you ever blame the way you act on how you are treated by others or on your circumstances?
4. The people in your life may never change their ways. Circumstances may be beyond your control. But there is something you can do to have peace. What is that?
5. Look up 1 John 1:9 and read it aloud. Think about what it means to your life and commit it to memory.

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