

You Make Me so Angry! or:

You are responsible for *your* emotions, not other people's!

Have you ever said, "you make me so angry?"

Let me see a show of hands!

Or, "this piece of music makes me happy!" Anyone?

Or: "The letter you wrote made me very sad."

Or: "This joke made me laugh."

Of course! This is quite common in our everyday language. But, you know, it is wrong! Our feelings - be they happiness, sadness, anger, or grief, rest within us. And we have absolute power over them! Maybe this is hard to believe - or just hard to recognize in daily life. Truly, it is hard to accept that we, in this "country of the free," give so many other people complete power over something as important as how we feel!

Whenever I start bringing up this concept in a counseling session, the first reaction is always: "No! It was his fault, it is her responsibility, that I feel so lousy, that I am sad, etc." Many of you in here probably think the same thing right now . . .

Don't worry. I will give you plenty of examples to prove my point, and to help you gain more freedom in the process. Let's start with the beginning of this worship service, the prelude. It was a piece of music called "Anger of the Gods" and whenever I hear it, shivers go down my spine, I unconsciously hunch my shoulders, and I want to turn it off right away. Did any of you experience something similar? Of course, if one of you is a fan of fantasy/horror movies, he or she will react quite differently: with excitement, anticipation, or great memories...

Let's start with the example I used during the Time for all ages: the fact that I still get sick when ever I hear *Santa Lucia* has nothing to do with the song itself. There is nothing wrong with the tune or the lyrics!

So - no one can really say, "this music makes me scared," because the exact same music, in the exact same room, played at the same volume, etc, may cause someone else to have the opposite reaction.

Here is the next example, music again. Dick, could you please play the first tune?

(Musician plays: *Little Drummer Boy*.) What do you feel when you hear this?

Shout it out! - Yes, Christmas-sy, warm, happy.

But you know, when I hear it, my instinctive emotional response is anxiety and the chills. Because this song was originally written as an anti-war song, and that's how I heard it in my youth. The lyrics talk about two young men, friends, who were going to war together, and only one of them coming back... the trumpeter got killed ...

Next example- Dick, please? (Musician plays: *Auld Lang Syne*.) What are your reactions? Louder! (*Repeating what people say*.)

But for me it evokes great sadness, because in German, the lyrics start with: "Farewell, brothers, uncertain is your return. The future is in the dark, and it makes our hearts heavy." It was traditionally sung when young soldiers were sent off to war; and it is still played in the Hamburg harbor whenever a passenger ship leaves ...

Okay, so you have seen now that the context makes a big difference. The same melody may lead to often opposite feelings in different listeners.

So it's not really the music itself that makes you feel a certain way - it is something within you that reacts to the music, based on previous exposure, memories, or conditioning.

Let's move away from music to a set of different examples. Let's say I tell you a joke about the difference between dogs and cats, for example: "dogs will answer your call – cats will take a message and get back to you..."

Now most of you will probably think that's hilarious and laugh out loud; but others may react quite differently and frown, because they think it's ridiculous to anthropomorphize animals. Right?

Or a more drastic example: a wife asks her husband, "why did you have to give me two black eyes?" and he responds, "want a third one?"

I'm sure that all of you here find this joke revolting - you become upset or angry when you hear it. However, imagine the same joke being told to a bunch of not quite sober guys in a redneck bar, and you'd probably hear roaring laughter.

Last example:

I love e.e.cummings. And especially the poem "*I thank you god for most this amazing ...*" which I read earlier. But one of my friends - with whom I have a lot in common as a rule - hates it, because she doesn't like the lack of proper capitalization and punctuation! So, once again, you see that the same set of words can lead different people to experience different feelings. It is not the written or spoken word that directly causes the feeling, but something within the listener, some conditioning or certain memories, which create the emotions.

Now you might ask, why do I write a whole sermon about something that's easily explained in a few sentences? Why do I want to draw your attention to this? Three reasons, actually.

The first is because I am your "Pastor" – it's about your psychological and spiritual health. Because - if you really believe that someone or something else can make you feel certain emotions, then you are giving away your power of self-determination. There really is no reason to do that! At the same time, the person you have empowered in that way, might then gleefully abuse this power. If you've ever dealt with teenagers, you know what I mean. . .

Or if you were raised by a "Jewish Mother . . ." I know what I'm talking about – my mother's most uttered sentence was, "see how you make me angry again?" Or, "you never worry about how that makes me feel..."

Well, with mothers we don't have much of a choice: they have the power to make us feel bad because motherhood seems to give them that power! But, once we are all grown up, we can and have to decide how much of that "tyranny" we want to keep in our lives.

The second reason for this sermon is closely related to the first: if you accuse someone else of making you feel a certain way, you will most likely cause guilt in that

person (maybe this is your intention in the first place). But the problem is actually on your shoulders. And it never bodes for a relationship if one person feels guilty towards the other.

And, of course, blaming someone else for your feelings will simultaneously keep you from analyzing or questioning why these feelings - that are bubbling up in you - are there in the first place.

One more problem: if you blame someone else for how you feel, you may very well cause an aggressive/ defensive reaction, which may escalate the situation into a conflict. Or a conflict into a crisis.

This aspect is clearly important when we deal with negative feelings like anger or frustration, but it also matters with happiness or joy. Sure, it's a wonderful thing to say, "you make me happy." But it's also a great idea to say - at least to yourself - "I feel happy because I am with this wonderful person. Whatever we are doing together is obviously right!

Having such positive thoughts affirms how well you interact with each other, how you have learned to be considerate, and occasionally compromise. This awareness leads to further positive behaviors in the future.

And a nice side-effect is that it leads to gratitude!

While I wrote this sermon, I was in Germany with my sister and her husband, and I had several opportunities to "experiment," in other words, to scientifically prove my hypothesis . . . The first occasion came when my brother-in-law came storming out of his home office, loudly complaining about his printer: "This piece of *bleep* is driving me crazy! It makes me so mad that I'll give to the trash collectors on Friday!"

I challenged him, "is it really this piece of metal and plastic that makes you so angry?" He ranted on, "of course, it's only one year old, and doesn't work anymore!"

"But how come you allow this dead machine to make you moan and cuss? What is it actually doing?" That made him stop and think. "Well, I'm mad because I paid good money for it, and now I have to go and buy a new printer! And money is tight now that I'm getting ready to retire, as you know. And besides that, I wanted to print out the photos for you to take home to America!" As he was speaking, Helmut recognized himself that in reality he was angry because of his fear of possible financial problems, and because he thought he was disappointing me. The printer was an innocent trigger.

And then, a few days later, my sister was complaining about her mother-in-law, who - in her loneliness - puts a lot of pressure on her son: She calls several times a day with often ridiculous seeming requests, and dear Helmut hurries next door to do her bidding. Evi ranted against her selfish mother-in-law, and said that she makes her furious.

Her "wise sister, the pastoral counselor ☺" was able to show her that she was angry because her husband seemed to put her needs behind the needs of his mother. When she realized this, she decided to have a conversation with Helmut about her feelings, instead of constantly telling him how angry his mother made her, which was only putting him on the defensive.

My third reason for exploring this topic with you today is mostly because of my decade of work as a "transition specialist." Having served 4 congregations in the last 10 years, I experienced plenty of times that change always creates anxiety, as well as excitement. Whenever I started work at a new congregation, there was always a lot of excitement. It was usually expressed by statements such as: "Your analysis makes me feel hopeful about our future!" Or: "your suggestions assure me about my role here in this committee."

It's nice to hear this, but - it's not exactly true: congregants are feeling hopeful because deep inside them, they know that they are members of a healthy congregation, and that they will be able to continue that way. And individuals feel good about their role, because they see a way to do good work for the beloved community.

But anxiety raises its ugly head, too. Almost from the first day on, people comment on the differences between the current minister and the person who served them before. "Why is she doing that? It makes me nervous!" or: "He shouldn't try to change things, people will feel neglected/confused/angry" – fill in the blank.

The bad part with anxiety within a system is that most folks do not go directly to the source with their worries or complaints - they talk to each other, and pretty soon, gossip begins to spread. And as you probably know, anxiety and worries are contagious. So here we have a situation – and it occurs in every congregation – where one person believes that the new minister caused him or her to feel worried, nervous, rejected ... fill in the blank.

And without realizing that the true cause for all those emotions is a deep-seated (and perfectly normal) fear of change, or the memory of a previous situation that bubbles up now, conflicts are created.

So --- If you want to change how you feel, you need to know who is in charge of your emotions. It's simply not true to say: "this music makes me feel uncomfortable;" or "my boss made me so mad again;" or even: "my grandchild's smile makes me happy."

I know that many of you are doubtful right now, but the more you think about it, and occasionally try it out, you will see it for yourselves: no outside person or event can control how you feel – only you can – by the meaning you give the events of your life. This is not to say that we should not take another person's emotions, feeling, and well-being into consideration – that would be pure narcissism. We must genuinely care for the other.

But – part of this caring is giving them the space, the time, and the respect to let them choose how they want to interpret the events of their life. No one ever feels angry with us because of us. They are angry because of how they are processing the world - and then projecting that onto us. To try to make this our fault takes away our power, and also takes away the power/opportunity of the other person to change.

But don't worry – there is help! You see, there is a great way to actually practice a better way of reacting, of communicating in a better way whenever you feel your emotions are keeping you from a rational and healthy response. Some of you might have heard of it: it's called *Nonviolent Communication* (NVC). It is taught in countless corporations, classrooms, prisons and mediation centers around the globe. NVC provides an easy to grasp, effective method to get to the root of violence, pain and conflict.

By examining the unmet needs behind what we do or say, NVC helps reduce hostility, heal pain and strengthen professional and personal relationships. I've written a separate sermon on NVC, which I will share with you later in the year, so today I will only share with you the very basic structure of a NVC conversation:

Instead of saying: "You make me angry," you will say "When I hear you say or do that, I feel angry." You then follow this statement with offering a solution by saying: "it would help me if you could . . ."

Trying to put a whole workshop into one sentence: you are using a process that leads to giving and receiving from the heart by Honestly Expressing how you are and what you would like - without using blame, criticism or demands; and Empathically Receiving how another feels and what he/she would like without hearing blame, criticism or demands.

To sum it up:

There are good news: no one can make you feel bad.

The really good news is, you can not make anyone feel bad.

And the really, really great news is that you can make yourself happy by adjusting the beliefs that cause you misery.

Claim your beliefs and actions as your own! Take back the reins of ownership and responsibility and consequential control that come with ownership. Take that outstretched finger you've been pointing at everyone else, and turn it back towards yourself. Not in blame, guilt, or judgment, but for answers and growth.