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The Angry American An Epidemic of Rage and Violence

Introduction

We live in violent times. The currently raging epidemic of so-called “senseless violence” has become *the* central concern of the American people, dominating news reportage despite the pressing presence of other serious issues, such as the economy and national health care reform. In the grotesque media glare of sickening stories—epitomized most recently by the sensational O. J. Simpson murder case—violence, mayhem, and murder promise to command the lion’s share of public attention and focus for the foreseeable future.

The reason for this spotlight on violence in America, by everyone from the media, to the president, to state and local politicians (even those who are not traditional “law and order” advocates), is as stark as it is simple: We are both frightened and fascinated by violence—and by evil in general. “Senseless violence” is the preeminent evil of our day. Citizens who once considered themselves safely cocooned and insulated from such evil now feel vulnerable, as unchecked violence spreads to the once sleepy suburbs, small towns, schools, shopping malls, sporting events, streets, trains, workplaces, and private abodes of middle-class America. Even blasé urban dwellers—no newcomers to a daily diet of destructive violence—are increasingly alarmed and appalled at the apparent trend

toward a more visibly violent society. During a period of just two years (1989 to 1991), the chances of becoming a victim of violence in America's besieged cities shot up by 14 percent. We appear to be in the throes of a pernicious outbreak of pathological violence.

Of course, there is controversy as to whether we are in fact *truly* witnessing an advancing avalanche of violence in America today, or whether we might merely be misperceiving this to be the case. Have we succumbed to mass hysteria? Personally, I doubt whether there is any meaningful way to scientifically settle this argument once and for all. Indeed, for most Americans, the matter of statistical proof may be quite beside the point. The growing furor over our national stigma of violence centers substantially less on the question of *quantity* than of *quality*: the quality of life in America has dramatically deteriorated during the past few decades, and is more violent than in almost any other "civilized" society. The United States holds the dubious distinction of having the highest homicide rate of any industrialized Western nation. Obviously, violence is not merely an American problem. At least since Cain slew Abel in anger, the story of humankind has been a violent one, punctuated by war, genocide, mass murder, and malevolence. Destructiveness and violence have proven to be deep-seated—perhaps even archetypal—patterns of human behavior. America itself was the child of violent conflict, conceived and born by way of anger, outrage, and stormy revolt. The subsequent annals of American history are replete with violence: the genocide of Native Americans in the name of "manifest destiny"; the infamous Salem "witch hunts," wherein countless innocent women were pitilessly persecuted; the bloody Civil War, pitting brother against brother, American against American; the vengeful lawlessness of the Wild West; the murderous malice toward blacks (as well as other minority groups), and the reactive, eruptive, incendiary race-riots; the shocking political assassinations; and now, the "senseless" violence we see surrounding us on all sides.

One possibility worth considering is that violence in America is cyclic: it comes and goes in crashing waves, between which there is comparative calm.¹ For many of us, this closing decade before the millennial year two thousand feels like the crest of such a violent wave, one which threatens to radically erode—if not inundate and wash away—the very foundations of civilized society. Americans may have wishfully believed that, as a culture, we had left our violent ways behind, transcended our most primitive tendencies by virtue of technological, psychological, and social enlightenment. We were mistaken. Sadly, there is a surplus of nasty incidents

symbolizing the now sullied American dream: An idolized former football star and affable international celebrity stands trial for a bloody double murder in Los Angeles;² in that same beleaguered city, two brothers are retried (following a hung jury in their first trial) and convicted of the chilling, premeditated murder of their millionaire parents in their posh Beverly Hills home; thirty-nine-year-old drifter and career criminal Richard Allen Davis confesses to randomly kidnapping and killing twelve-year-old Polly Klaas, snatching her from the supposed safety of her suburban bedroom; the wholesale slaughter at a San Francisco law firm leaves eight dead and six wounded by an irate gunman, who, for his fitting finale, turns his weapon against himself; and, in New York City, a man riding on the Long Island Railroad calmly rises from his seat and methodically massacres fellow passengers. Such atrocious and seemingly random acts of violence have become so common as to take their place in the amorphous American landscape alongside hot dogs, apple pie, baseball, and Budweiser. Violence—brutal, bloody, “senseless” violence—has become a new national pastime. According to U.S. Justice Department statistics, violent crimes increased almost 6 percent from 1992 to 1993.³ By 1994, the situation had grown sufficiently serious, and was of such grave concern to the government, that the United States Congress—after considerable debate—passed a thirty billion dollar national crime bill. On signing the bill, President Clinton appealed to all Americans to “ ‘roll up our sleeves to roll back this awful tide of violence.’ ”⁴

The workplace has been especially hard hit by this scourge, serving almost routinely as the gory staging ground for some disgruntled ex-employee, worker, or customer’s deadly revenge. Such violent assaults have been occurring in offices all across the country—not only in New York or California. As reported in one recent article, “workplace violence is more common than most believe. . . . According to a Northwestern National Life Insurance Company nationwide study on workplace violence from July 1992 to July 1993, 2.2 million workers were victims of physical attack: 6.3 million were threatened and 16.1 million were harassed.”⁵ Moreover, violence is taking its terrible toll on virtually every sector of American society, including economics: By some estimates, billions of dollars are being lost because of the negative impact violence has—both directly and indirectly—on the morale, productivity, and mental or physical health of American workers.⁶

In his book, *On Being Mad or Merely Angry*, about would-be presidential assassin John Hinckley, Jr., political scientist James Clarke states that during the past two decades,

instances of occupational frustration being expressed in mass bloodshed are regularly reported. For example, in 1976 a man in Baltimore, angry because of delays in receiving a business permit, shot five municipal employees, killing one; in 1982 an IBM salesman shot five fellow workers, killing three, because he felt that he had been passed over for promotion; in 1986 a disgruntled postal employee in Oklahoma killed fourteen fellow employees before taking his own life; and in 1987 a recently dismissed airline employee shot a pilot, his former boss, and himself, causing the crash of a Pacific Southwestern flight that, incidentally, killed forty other passengers.⁷

Even the sacred refuge of home, that once secure *sanctum sanctorum*, is no longer safe haven. Runaway violence has violated our residences, in forms ranging from stray bullets from drive-by shootings killing innocent family members, to full-blown domestic violence, such as child abuse and spousal battering. Almost one-third of all live-in sexual relationships involve some level of violence between the partners; an estimated one million American children or more are physically or emotionally abused. Domestic violence has become the heated topic of renewed rancor ever since the reported spousal abuse of Nicole Brown Simpson, as well as the indelicate case of Lorena Bobbitt: the woman who cut off her husband's penis with a carving knife, in retaliation for prior mistreatment. The boyish Menendez brothers, who admit to having shotgunned their mother and father to death in their own den, horrified jurors during the first trial with tales of extreme sexual and psychological abuses perpetrated upon them by their wealthy parents, purportedly prompting their violent parricide.

Permit me to cite in some detail Professor Clarke's disturbing conclusions concerning the motivations and mental states that accompany mayhem and murder. He cites one study of mass murderers which found that

in 75 percent of the 364 cases . . . studied, the killers knew their victims. The motives of mass murderers who know their victims, and are expressing their hostility directly, are usually easier to identify. Often the victims are family members or fellow employees. . . .

For example, in 1987 alone there were at least three such incidents: a former Air Force sergeant killed fourteen members of his family in Arkansas; another man killed his parents, in-laws, wife, and two children in the state of Washington; and another man gunned down seven relatives in Missouri.⁸

In such debacles, says Clarke, “the choice of victims is selective, not random. And in virtually every case there is some frustration, some grievance, that has developed between the killer and his victims which precedes the tragedy” (p. 94).

Then there is the mushrooming number of “random” acts of violence, like James Huberty’s mass shooting at a McDonald’s in 1984, killing twenty-one unlucky customers:

“Five months after . . . Huberty’s rampage in San Ysidro,” recounts Clarke,

Michael Feher barricaded himself atop the stadium at the University of Oregon and shot two people, killing one of them before he was killed. In 1989 another troubled young man, Patrick Edward Purdy, opened fire on a schoolyard full of children in Stockton, California, with an AK-47 assault rifle; he wounded thirty and killed five before he killed himself. . . . All the killers mentioned died at the scene, as they intended to do, their motives remaining obscure. (pp. 94–95)

“Such people,” Clarke concludes, “kill, it seems . . . simply to make a statement about their disillusionment with their own lives. . . . Most did not appear to be psychotic. Angry, yes, but not mad. Neither . . . inhibited by conscience . . . nor . . . constrained by fear . . . the anonymous mass murderer selects surrogate targets . . . for his rage” (p. 95). In this book, among other things, we will be exploring the intricate interrelationship between anger, rage, “madness,” mental disorders, and insanity (see, for instance, chapter six).

Undoubtedly, there is a great deal of disillusionment these days. Shell-shocked citizens who have not yet retreated to the anesthetic safety of what Robert Jay Lifton terms *psychic numbing*—a defensive means of psychologically desensitizing oneself to such terrible carnage—are understandably stunned. Even Europeans, inured as they are to the dark and tragic side of life, look on in utter dismay and disbelief, as they repeatedly see their own touring citizenry savagely assaulted only hours after setting foot on American soil. What on earth is going on there?, they justly wonder. Not that such violent crimes never occur on the Continent, or elsewhere for that matter. One well-publicized case in Liverpool, England, in 1993, involved two ten-year-old boys deliberately killing a two-year-old child, behavior that the disgusted sentencing magistrate labeled unmitigated “evil.” In March, 1996, in Dunblane, Scotland, a middle-aged man with a history of strange behavior and a passion for handguns

fired on a gymnasium filled with five and six-year-olds, slaying sixteen and seriously wounding a dozen more before committing suicide. And a scant six weeks later, in Tasmania, Australia, a twenty-eight-year-old man armed with a rifle inexplicably massacred thirty-five people en masse, wounding eighteen. It is, however, the furious pace at which these unnerving events are proliferating in America—as well as their sheer viciousness—that has so many of us so worried. Indeed, according to a 1988 study conducted by the United States government, “crimes of violence (homicide, rape, and robbery) are four to nine times more frequent in the United States than they are in Europe.”¹⁰

What are the roots of our malady? Some place the blame on the overabundance and ready availability of firearms in this country (there are almost as many guns in America as people); or on our overwhelmed, underfinanced judicial system; or the gratuitous violence pervading American movies and television programming; or the disintegration of the nuclear family and the demise of traditional “family values”; or on substance abuse; tough economic times; the disenfranchisement of the poor and the uneducated; and so forth. It is no doubt true, for instance, that the troubled “dysfunctional family”—that is, the widespread dissolution of a cohesive, secure container in which children can be adequately loved, cared for, nurtured, protected, and imbued with the collective values of the culture—must be blamed for a great many social ills. (See, for example, the writings of Alice Miller and John Bradshaw.) The family is not only the transmitter of social mores to the next generation; it is the sacred crucible wherein the psychological well-being of each new adult generation is largely determined. Given the violent trend of the past twenty years or so, it seems patently clear that the American family has been failing its children miserably, and is now paying the bloody price for this failure. Problems within the dysfunctional family frequently include parental aggression against children—in the forms of physical, verbal, and sexual abuse—which ultimately begets further aggression and abuses against society. Because we unconsciously or automatically tend to parent our children in ways similar to how we ourselves were parented, abused children often grow up to be abusive adults and parents. Traumatic childhood abuse creates a pathological generation comprised of the “walking wounded”: psychologically crippled adults who, while ostensibly functional, can be wickedly cruel to each other, as well as insidiously self-destructive. This vicious cycle must be stopped.

Yet, though I concede that each of these corrosive undercurrents are significant factors contributing to the 11 percent increase in violent

crime over the past decade, they seem to me to be symptomatic of a much broader, more pervasive, sinister, and ominous social phenomenon. There is a common thread, a single, latent leitmotif that underlies, runs through, and interconnects these legitimate concerns. It has become the postmodern American *Zeitgeist*, a feeling which at once divides and unites us. It is our immense *anger* and *rage*. Whether we are willing to admit it or not, *we Americans are an angry people*. We are living not only in an “age of anxiety,” as W. H. Auden, Paul Tillich, Rollo May, and other astute students of the twentieth-century psyche have observed, but in an “era of rage” as well. This distressing fact is vividly evident in our daily newspapers, nightly network coverage, radio talk shows, prime-time television, popular music, movies, video games, modern art, literature, and—perhaps most unpleasantly of all—in our own close encounters with the hostility, incivility, and animosity so endemic to modern life as we now know it. “Road rage” is one extravagant example.

The cultural, interpersonal, and individual problems posed by the potent passions of anger and rage are copious, complex, and highly charged. One such critical outcropping is *violence*, that all-too-frequent offspring of anger and rage. Today we are witnessing the roaring resurgence of our long-simmering anger and rage. Anger and rage—like sexuality in Sigmund Freud’s Victorian era—have come to be regarded as evil, sinful, destructive, uncivilized, pagan, and primitive passions, much better buried than openly admitted. The volatile emotions of anger and rage have been broadly “demonized,” vilified, maligned, and rejected as purely pathological, negative impulses with no real redeeming qualities. As a result, most “respectable” Americans habitually suppress, repress, or deny their anger—inadvertently rendering it doubly dangerous: The chronic suppression of anger and rage can and does sow the evil seeds of psychopathology, hatred, and violence, as this study strives to demonstrate.

This sweeping denunciation of anger and rage can be found even in the fields of psychology and psychiatry. Most current psychotherapies (including the classic psychoanalytic therapies of Freud and Jung) or cutting-edge psychopharmacological treatments (such as antidepressant drugs or tranquilizers) fail to provide adequate assistance to patients struggling with the powerful “demons” of anger and rage; indeed, in some instances, such treatment approaches may make matters worse. While there has happily been burgeoning interest and research in this area over the past twenty years, the complicated clinical problems presented by anger and rage remain far and away the most confounding Gordian knot still faced in the effective practice of psychotherapy.

One fundamental difficulty has to do with the fact that some psychotherapies do not adequately discriminate between *normal* and *pathological* anger or rage. Many modern clinicians have no appreciation of the nature, meaning, and positive value of *healthy* anger and rage. Psychologists, psychiatrists, and counselors sorely need to reappraise anger and rage, their contributory roles in violence and psychopathology, as well as their central significance in psychotherapy. At the same time, we must more fully recognize the potentially constructive—even creative—power of anger and rage, coexisting side-by-side with its notorious capacity for destructiveness, violence, and evil. Prominent American psychoanalyst Rollo May, almost thirty years ago, articulated this task by pointing out that anger or rage (like other *daimonic* passions) “will always be characterized by the paradox inhering in the fact that it is potentially creative and destructive at the same time. This is the most important question facing modern psychotherapy, and the most fateful also—for on it hinges the lasting and the survival of therapy.”¹¹ We will be delving deeply into the meaning, nature, and clinical implications of the mysterious, classic conundrum called “the daimonic,” and its contemporary relevance to anger, rage, evil, violence, and, paradoxically, creativity. In some instances, we will be hearing from May himself—among many others—on these seasonable subjects.

The vexing enigma of violence has now reached epidemic proportions. For this sobering reason, the great challenge of constructively redirecting and rechannelling our anger and rage must be made a national as well as a personal priority. Unless we learn to come to better terms with our wrath, it will no doubt destroy us. Here in America, Pandora’s box has blown open and cannot be closed. This explosive state of affairs presents itself, as we will see, with mounting regularity in psychotherapeutic practice. The process of psychotherapy mirrors in so many subtle ways the societal psyche: patients typically reflect in their personal problems precursors of current and coming cultural crises. I propose that the psychological, physical, and spiritual health of American culture depends on how well we can creatively—and therapeutically—harness the prodigious power of these darkest and least accepted of human emotions. This book is intended to be an exploratory step in that direction. It marks a modest attempt to shed some much-needed psychological light on the still obscure subjects of anger, rage, madness, evil, and creativity; make some sense of “senseless” violence; and maybe even provide some moral sustenance in our battle against the raging blight of evil bedeviling us.

Existential Roots of Anger, Rage, and Violence

Let us commence our mission to root out the meaning of anger, rage, and violence by first examining some of their existential sources. By “existential,” I mean naturally occurring, universal, and inescapable aspects of the human condition. The relationship between anger, rage, violence, and *psychopathology*—that which is abnormal, unnatural, or aberrant in human behavior and experience—will be taken up later, in chapter six.

Like most human behavior, violence has meaning: it only seems “senseless” or “meaningless” to the extent we are unable—or unwilling—to decode or comprehend it. It is my belief that most violence—“senseless” or otherwise—stems from the fiery human emotions of anger and rage. To be sure, not *all* violent behavior has its origins in anger and rage: Some is learned, having been socially reinforced in the past; some is politically or economically motivated; and some violence is driven primarily by what philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche termed “the will to power.” But, as a practicing psychologist, it is my observation that the vast majority of violence is the byproduct of anger, or, more precisely, of *rage*.

The Nature of Rage

More often than not, violent behavior in both animals and humans indicates the presence of rage. Rage, in its purest and most primitive form, is an instinctual, defensive reaction to severe stress or physical threat, an autonomic reflex which we humans share in common with “lower” animals. This organismic response to serious threat, anxiety, or stress has been experimentally demonstrated by both Walter Cannon (1915) and Hans Selye (1946).¹² It is referred to as the “fight or flight” response, and serves as a vital, first-line physiological defense for the survival of the species. Any threat to the continued physical existence of the organism may elicit the impulse to escape the threatening situation, or, when escape is not possible, to physically defend itself by attacking the perceived source of that threat.

The perennial question as to whether “aggression” and the violence generally associated with aggression is, like rage, also a biologically inborn, genetically predisposed or even predetermined behavior in human beings—as Freud and Darwin believed—is still hotly debated. While it is tempting to be drawn into an either/or argument when considering such basic matters, and though we may never know for certain the full extent to which violence is a biologically predetermined part of human behavior, one thing

is clear: No amount of scientific research or speculation so far has dispelled the age-old wisdom that human beings are comprised partially of animal instincts or innate responses, including the archetypal capacity for anger, rage, and violence. Were this not so, such “negative” reactions could never have come to be as closely linked with *la condition humaine* as are the intrinsic capacities to care, love, create, etc.

One relatively recent study, *Aggression: The Myth of the Beast Within*, sought to debunk—from a multidisciplinary perspective drawn from anthropology, biology, ethology, political science, sociology, zoology, and behavioral psychology—the familiar Freudian notion of innate aggression.¹³ This motley group summarizes and challenges—unconvincingly, in my view—some of our most common preconceptions about the psychological links between anger, aggression, and violence: “We operate with several different and only partially consistent folk models of aggression,” say these scientists.

One such model is based upon the notion that aggression is caused by anger, an emotion that is commonly regarded as existing within us, rather like some sort of alien being that is capable of acting independently of our reason or our will. This notion is part of a more general Western view that sees emotions as physical forces; these, when strong enough, may impel or even compel conduct for which the actor can scarcely be regarded as responsible. We are all familiar with the idea of people being “carried away by their emotions”; and the idea of a “crime of passion” has a secure place not only in popular parlance but even in some Western legal systems. . . .

Linked to this view of anger as a force or a being within us is the idea that it may accumulate over time, or under provocation, to the point where perhaps the final response is both inevitable and out of all proportion with the immediate cause. We speak of our feelings “welling up inside” us, and of our “pent-up emotions”; and we imagine some sort of accumulating reservoir of anger seeking release. Moreover, we believe that the fullness of this reservoir has physiological consequences . . . : it may be associated not only with the familiar red face and tense muscles of belligerence but also, perhaps, with the headache or the ulcer of frustrated fury.¹⁴

These nine co-authors come to the comforting collective conclusion that aggression and violence are *not* predetermined, and therefore, not

inevitable human behaviors. But though these scientists are well-intentioned, make some valid points, and seek to deliver a more hopeful and optimistic message for the future than did Darwin or Freud, it will take more than mere objective, scientific rationalism to “slay”—or even to tame—the archetypal “beast within.” What they naively neglect to provide is a very much-needed, meaningful alternative to the fatalistic biological “beast” myth, one based on a more existentially unifying, fundamentally *human* model of motivation and behavior—a task to which we shall be applying ourselves in this treatise.

Social psychologist Carol Tavris, in her book *Anger: The Misunderstood Emotion*, notes that “Darwin argued that rage is a simple response to threat, which requires an animal to become aroused to defend itself. In fact, Darwin actually *defined* rage as the motivation to retaliate: ‘Unless an animal does thus act, or has the intention, or at least the desire to attack its enemy, it cannot properly be said to be enraged.’”¹⁵ Accepting this sensible, instinctual definition of rage, she then brusquely dismisses what I find to be Darwin’s equally sensible definition of *anger* as a less intense, but essentially similar emotion, charging Charles Darwin with being “a poor psychologist” (p. 33). In my view, Tavris is too hard on Darwin: The human rage reaction cannot be completely and qualitatively divorced from anger; the distinction is primarily quantitative. Whereas rage appears to operate via an “on” or “off” switching mechanism, with the “on” position consisting of one constant voltage, anger, to continue my electrical metaphor, can be controlled by way of a “dimmer” switch, which modulates the relative intensity of the current. But the elemental source of energy for both anger and rage remains one and the same.

Tavris goes on to argue that the phenomenon of anger is an infinitely more complex and subtle emotion than the biologically based human rage response. Unlike the gross, primitive affect of rage, there are numerous nuances of anger as well as myriad subtleties in both its subjective experience and objective expression. Jungian analyst Stephen Martin informs us, for instance, that “the Latin scholars and poets Seneca and Plutarch wrote extensively on anger. In more recent times, Averill reports that about 90 years ago the eminent American psychologist G. S. Hall collated from his research on emotion some 2200 descriptions of angry states.”¹⁶ But, as Tavris’ book title rightly suggests, anger remains a most misunderstood emotion. Rollo May, for one, notes that there is a tendency to “confuse anger with temper, which is generally an explosion of repressed anger; with petulance, which is childish resentment; or with hostility, which is anger absorbed into our character structures until it

infects [our] every act. . . .”¹⁷ Indeed, the nebulous terms “anger,” “irritation,” “resentment,” “rage,” “hostility,” and “aggression” are used synonymously—and imprecisely—by both scientist and layperson alike.

Psychologist Charles Spielberger and associates report that “in the psychological and psychiatric literature, anger, hostility, and aggression generally refer to different though related phenomena, but these terms are often used interchangeably.”¹⁸ Reviewing the available research literature on “anger,” “hostility,” and “aggression,” Spielberger et al. proposed the following operational definitions of these confusing constructs:

“The concept of anger usually refers to an emotional state that consists of feelings that vary in intensity, from mild irritation or annoyance to intense fury and rage. Although hostility usually involves angry feelings, this concept has the connotation of a complex set of attitudes that motivate aggressive behaviors directed toward destroying objects or injuring other people. . . . While anger and hostility refer to feelings and attitudes, the concept of aggression generally implies destructive or punitive behavior directed towards other persons or objects.”¹⁹

But what about the *positive* side of anger and aggression?

Positive Aspects of Anger and Rage

As evidenced above, the trouble with the term *aggression* is its tremendous ambiguity: aggression is the most generic connotation of anger possible, so comprehensive in scope that it subsumes entirely too many components to be a truly useful research construct. Aggression is not an emotion like anger or rage, and for this reason, it is best to confine the use of this term to an individual’s attitude toward others or toward life in general, or to describe a certain quality of behavior. But it must be remembered that aggressive attitudes or behaviors are *not* necessarily negative or destructive. Aggression is closely related to *assertion*, and can be seen in contrast to acute *passivity* or *apathy*—both of which suggest a pathological absence of normal, natural, and sometimes even necessary aggression. Violence is aggression *in extremis*.

Psychoanalyst Willard Gaylin, author of *The Rage Within: Anger in Modern Life*, observes that “the heroes of the Old Testament were imbued with fire and rage, from the psychotic rage of Saul to the unpredictable rage

of David to the justifiable rage of Jeremiah. Their heroism remains undiminished, really enhanced, by their human qualities of frustration, annoyance, irritability and temper—all dimensions of anger.”²⁰ Anger—and rage, the most extreme form of anger—can be an enlivening, animating, transformative, creative, even spiritual force. Despite the negative connotations associated with anger, there are those ordinary individuals—not “artists” per se—who discover ways to direct this dynamic power into positive projects. We have all known people with a “raging passion” for work, love, and life, an irrepressible spirit, a furious inner force that drives them forward—against all obstacles—toward the constructive pursuit of their dreams and the creative fulfillment of their personal destiny. They—like the gifted artists whose psychology we will contemplate in chapter eight—have learned to put their anger, rage, or “aggression” to good use.

Whereas Plato, like Seneca, says Gaylin, took a primarily negative view of anger,

it remained for Aristotle, with his strong biological roots, to enunciate an attitude toward anger which acknowledged its value. He neither condemned it out of hand nor allowed it full reign. As with all other emotions, he praised the median in the expression and use of anger. He was certainly no Christian arguing that the good man must abandon all his rights to negative passion, must love his enemy and turn the other cheek. “Those who do not show anger at things that ought to arouse anger are regarded as fools; so too if they do not show anger in the right way, the right time or at the right person.”²¹

Surely there are (as will later be discussed in chapter six) predominantly destructive, pathological manifestations of anger and rage—chronic hostility and hatred, narcissistic rage, violently explosive temper, or impulsive, suicidal self-loathing—rightly requiring some sort of legal intervention and/or psychotherapeutic resolution, both for the sake of the afflicted individual as well as for the safety of the community. Like Bill Foster, the tragic anti-hero in Joel Schumacher’s quintessential American film, *Falling Down* (1992), such people have pent up their anger to the point that they can no longer contain it; they have never learned to cope with their day-to-day frustration and feelings of anger or rage constructively. The rising real-life incidence of mass murder by berserk bombers and mad gunmen in America may well turn out to be the upshot not of too little inhibition of anger, as some cultural critics claim, but rather of too much socially sanctioned self-suppression: their

anger and resentment building over time into a morbidly impelling, murderous rage.

Rage, like love or *eros*, is a daimonic passion, capable of blindly pushing us into violently destructive behavior. This puissant state of “blind rage” rivals romantic love—which, as we know, is also proverbially “blind”—in sheer intensity. In the common usage of the word “blind” to describe both love and rage, there lies a collective recognition that these dynamic emotional states have the power to hinder one’s insight, judgment, and capacity to see or anticipate the possible consequences of acting on such compelling passions. Professor Robert Zaslow, whose remarkable therapeutic approach to rage and anger is reviewed in chapter seven, points out that “the word *rage* is derived from the middle French/English word *rabia*, meaning *rabies*. . . . The word for *rabies* in French is *rage*.”²² Rabies is an infectious disease transmitted to humans by rabid (i.e., unpredictable, diseased, and dangerous) animals, which, when untreated, causes blindly irrational behavior, madness, and death. The English word *rabid* translates into French as *furieux*, *féroce*, or *enragé*: furious, ferocious, enraged. *Distemper*—a viral disease not dissimilar to rabies—is yet another term sometimes associated with mental derangement, anger, and violently convulsive rage. Shakespeare employed this terminology in referring to Hamlet’s madness:

. . . O gentle son,
Upon the heat and flame of thy distemper
Sprinkle cool patience.²³

According to Webster, the word *rage* “usually adds to *anger* the idea of loss of control, of inner frustration, revengefulness, or temporary derangement.” *Ire* indicates “a somewhat greater emotional turmoil than *anger*”; and *fury* implies “extreme overmastering rage; sometimes it refers to a violent and indignant anger kept barely under control.”²⁴ Anger, at least initially, as compared to rage, is a less intensely felt and instinctually driven human emotion, more analogous to the experience of “liking” someone than to feeling infatuated or “falling in love.” However, when anger is habitually denied or repressed—that is, when it remains unconscious—it transmutes over time into something closely resembling and intrinsically rooted in rage. The phenomena of anger and rage are, and ever will be, inextricably intertwined. Moreover, the primal fear of anger, due to its long-standing association with violent behavior, can be found in its Latin (*angor*) and Greek (*anchein*) roots, both of which refer to “strangling.”

But though rage is frequently a pathological form of anger, we would be badly misled to believe that *all* rage is pathological per se; nor is rage necessarily negative. As Darwin discovered, rage is a naturally occurring phenomenon, the capacity for which is biologically built-in to our being. But the ability to experience rage encompasses more than merely feeling the farthest reaches of anger possible. Zaslow boldly defines *rage* as “the highest, most intense form of arousal for full materialization of resources that can be used destructively or constructively. . . . It is the peak experience of anger, as well as the peak experience of joy.”²⁵ For to feel rage fully, to be totally filled with it, even temporarily overcome or possessed by it, is to know a type of ecstasy—a momentary loss of voluntary control, social inhibition, and self-discipline; a surrender to animal instinct, as occurs during sexual orgasm; a direct—and sometimes purposely sought after—*participation mystique* in the daimonic powers of nature. As we shall see in chapter five, such ecstatic states can be found, for instance, in artistic activity, at those treasured times when one is seized by raw creative energy, fueling a furious, frenzied spasm of inspired productivity; or, as is more commonly the case, in convulsive outbreaks of destructive rage and violence. In either event, the subject is involuntarily swept up in a paroxysmal state of raging passion. The fact, writes May, “that violence is often associated with ecstatic experiences is seen in our using the same phrases for both. We say a person is ‘beside himself’ with rage; he is ‘possessed’ by power. There also occurs a self-transcendence in violence which is like the self-transcendence in ecstatic experiences. The total absorption, furthermore, that is present in violence is also present in ecstasy.”²⁶ To feel real rage is to feel real life pared down to its purist, simplest state: the rousing, rapturous flush of unfettered vitality, pristine purpose, and unshakable will. It is at such moments that we are most alive.

Permit me at this point to provide the following definition: *Anger and rage are psychobiological reactions to an actual or perceived insult or threat to the integrity and dignity of an individual or group.* It is precisely because there *do* in fact continue to exist such insults, impediments, stumbling blocks, hindrances, and threats to our well-being, psychological growth, vocational satisfaction, and spiritual development, that the primal capacity for anger and rage persists instead of becoming vestigial. Zaslow adroitly distilled the situation this way:

Darwin discusses rage as one of the basic emotions of animals, including man. High arousal states, in terms of fight or flight, certainly have high survival value for animals. While flight is

a response to fear and terror, fight is a rage confrontation response. When flight is no longer useful, an animal will frequently turn around and face the pursuer in a rage, ready for battle. In the animal's fight for survival, the rage reaction reduces fear and terror. The animal is fully mobilized for strong and efficient action, thus permitting a better chance for survival. . . . In a sense, the rage state in animals permits fully integrated responses of high efficiency and intensity. It is a rage to live! In this state the animal feels good. The rage reaction is a primitive, biological response found in many species, and it still maintains its continuity in the evolution of man as a species. . . . From the human psychological point of view, the biological vitality inherent in high arousal states [such as rage] can be used [therapeutically] to break through resistances and release energy for constructive self-assertion and productive work. . . . Indeed, man does not want to eliminate his rage capacity and potential for rage arousals, since that would threaten his organismic vitality.²⁷

Zaslow was absolutely right about this: Were we clever humans ever to devise some behavioral, biochemical, or surgical method of depotentiating our congenital capacity for anger or rage, not only would we surrender our biological vigor; we would injure our psychological integrity, and, as we shall discuss in chapter eight, curtail our creativity. Moreover, anger, and even rage, can be beneficially utilized in the treatment of most mental disorders, as demonstrated in chapter seven.

The Vital Value of Violence

Anger and rage, as we begin to see, can sometimes be healthy, adaptive reactions to the inherent frustration, stress, and banality of modern life. But what about violence? Can violence ever be considered a positive, constructive, valuable, even healthy human behavior? *Violence is the most extreme behavioral response possible to perceived threat, be it real or imagined, emotional, financial, spiritual or physical.* At the most primitive level, violence serves as the crudest Darwinian survival mechanism of all: kill or be killed, conquer or be conquered, eat or be eaten. For those unfortunate flotsam and jetsam of society functioning at this beastly plane of subsistence—benighted denizens of the inner cities, the embattled ghettos, the teeming “concrete jungles”

of America, broken products of severe poverty, abuse, racism, chronic mental illness, drug addiction, alcoholism, and homelessness—violence is never senseless. It is a way of life. It is purposive. It is, from their perspective, self-perpetuation, pure and simple. For this ever-swelling segment of Americans, violence has its own intrinsic value: it signifies survival.

But, as we have already illustrated, violence is not limited to this barbarous sliver of society; it is endemic in America, knowing no socioeconomic bounds. Yet, for most of us, that which once threatened the very survival and success of our ancestors—animal predators, rampant disease, starvation, exposure, and so forth—no longer poses as serious a threat to our everyday existence. To be sure, poverty and hunger still stalk some Americans; but for most, starvation, saber-toothed tigers, snakes, bears and other fearsome beasts of prey have been supplanted today by far more menacing, human predators. We have somehow become our own worst enemy. How has this happened? Could the mounting violence in America—this truly Frankensteinian phenomenon—be a compensatory, collective stand-in for the life-threatening environment once faced daily by our feisty forebears? Have we as a culture unconsciously created this monstrosity? Perhaps our forefathers in far-off places were too busy fending off man-eating monsters or bone-chilling winters, and protecting their families from other potentially fatal natural phenomena to vent their spleen so vigorously on each other. When the elemental risks of existence have been eliminated or circumvented via technological and cultural advances, we may feel better, somewhat more secure—at least outwardly. But inwardly, we have lost something of great value in this Faustian bargain: we have forfeited our basic sense of spontaneity, adventure, vitality, and romance. We have traded ecstasy for security. Hence the strong allure of high-risk activities like skydiving, bungee-jumping, gambling, recreational drug use, and “unsafe” sex—all ways of seeking ecstasy—as well as the wild popularity of violent spectator sports like ice hockey, boxing, and football, in which we can, at least vicariously, still passionately participate. But frenetic activity can never replace the privation of purpose, passion, and meaning modernity imposes upon us. It is a grievous loss that has now itself become a grave threat to our psychological well-being. We have relinquished, overcome, or excised some of the inherent challenges of life, challenges without which we cannot live. We humans need to be challenged, for it is challenge which imbues life with meaning, passion, and purpose. Without some degree of challenge from day to day, existence becomes boring, mundane, insipid, and dull. For too many Americans, this vapidness of modern life, “this void is that from which the ecstasy of

violence is an escape. . . . Violence,” says May, “puts the risk and challenge back, whatever we may think about its destructiveness; and no longer is life empty.”²⁸ If truth be told, even violence has its virtues.

As with anger and rage, we tend—for good reason—to view violence with a combination of contempt, condemnation, fear, and fascination. This enigmatic human reaction to violence touches on the overarching topic of *evil*, as we shall see in chapter three. But despite the typically evil, destructive, disintegrative effects of violence, in certain cases and contexts, violence can be constructive—and sometimes absolutely necessary! Take for example the Allied involvement during World War II against the unchecked aggression of Hitler’s Third Reich. What would have happened had we not violently intervened? Were it not for the violent revolution against Great Britain by our freedom-loving forebears, America—with all of its problems, promise, and power—would not exist today. Even violence—or the properly employed threat of violence—much as we might object to its use on spiritual, religious, or moral grounds, has a rightful place in human affairs.

On the individual level, violence, avers May, “is a uniting of the self in action. Jean-Paul Sartre writes that violence is creating the self. It is an organizing of one’s powers to prove one’s power, to establish the worth of the self.”²⁹ May goes on to suggest that “there are an infinite number of situations in which people live at subhuman levels, and they find that some violence is life-giving. The overly shy person; the one unable to love deeply or to give to another; the coward who insulates himself from experiences that would enrich him—the list becomes endless. These are all individuals in whom some admixture of violence may help to correct a deficiency.”³⁰ But what do May and Sartre mean by “violence”? Murder? Mayhem? How far can one go—if at all—in condoning violence?

One possible criterion could be posed as follows: Violence can be condoned insofar as its ultimate consequences are more likely to be constructive than destructive. Violence—like all other daimonic potentialities—can be engaged in for good or evil. Violence that primarily serves the *good*—healing, wholeness, consciousness, freedom, integrity—can be considered *constructive violence*; *destructive violence* is that which engenders *evil*. (Such definitions and distinctions—as well as the question of who bears responsibility for being the final arbiter of good and evil—will be addressed a little later.) Constructive violence—in contradiction to destructive violence, that “swift and great force that causes damage or injury”—represents the *positive* application of that “great

force . . . of feeling”³¹ found in anger, rage, and aggressive self-assertion. Hence May’s reminder that “for the self-respecting human being, violence is always an ultimate possibility—and it will be resorted to less if admitted than if suppressed. For the free man it remains in imagination an ultimate exit when all other avenues are denied by unbearable tyranny or dictatorship over the spirit as well as the body.”³² Or, in the immortal words of Herman Melville:

Nature has not implanted any power in man that was not meant to be exercised at times, though too often our powers have been abused. The privilege, inborn and inalienable, that every man has, of dying himself, and inflicting death upon another, was not given to us without a purpose. These are the last resources of an insulted and unendurable existence.³³

The word *violence* is related to *violation*: anger, rage, and violence may be very appropriate reactions to intolerable violations of one’s dignity, privacy, and inalienable right to self-determination—as any disenfranchised individual, abuse victim, or oppressed freedom fighter instinctively understands. In some situations, like domestic violence for instance, it is precisely the momentous decision to risk everything, to finally stand up and fight for one’s precious freedom and dignity, that lends meaning and significance to an otherwise enslaved existence. In heroically courageous—or desperate—decisions such as these, violence is much less motivated by revenge than by the vital and irrepressible personal will to freedom and self-determination, and can be conscientiously said to be warranted only when all other means of constructive communication and appropriate self-assertion prove ineffective.

These, then, are but some of the existential meanings, motivations, and constructive functions of anger, rage, and violence, without which we would not survive as a species—as surely as if we continue to permit destructive violence to run wild. Our ongoing existential analysis spans the ensuing pages.

Up until now, we have dwelled mainly on the various implications of anger, rage, and violence for the *individual*. But we cannot afford to forget that the current epidemic of violence in America also contains a vital *collective* meaning: It is a glaring symptom of societal *dis-ease*. America is gravely ill. Violence is the raging fever gripping it. Our sickness may be seen in other morbid signs and symptoms as well. For instance, a recent news story in the *San Francisco Examiner* blared the following bizarre banner: “MANSON: FROM KILLER TO CULT HERO; New generation decides the mass murderer is cool.”³⁴

When malicious mass murderers like Charles Manson or Adolf Hitler are made into pop icons by the upcoming generation, there is clearly something very, very wrong. Psychotic cult leaders like Manson, Jim Jones, and David Koresh; devil-worship, ritual abuse, Satanism and neo-Nazism (both in the United States and Europe); as well as sexual and racial antagonism are all on the rise. These are not good prognostic signs as regards the state of our national mental health.³⁵

Nevertheless, let us remind ourselves that so long as the patient has a fever, he or she still has life. Fever is a symptom of disease or infection; but it is also a vital sign that there is a furious inner battle taking place, a titanic internal conflict between destructive invading forces and the body's own rather violent natural defenses: the immune system.³⁶ We are witnessing just such a prodigious inner struggle played out in the collective American psyche. Our unresolved resentment, anger, and rage has turned virulent, poisonous, toxic, cancerous. As a nation, we suffer from a severe "psychic infection," of which destructive violence is the primary symptom. Whether this rabid infection proves fatal to our system and our selves still remains to be seen. For as long as there is fever, there is hope.

Fate, Frustration, and Fury: A Violent Case in Point

Destructively violent behavior typically arises from some combination of existential and psychopathological factors. I would like next to examine an actual case that may help further illustrate both the existential and the psychopathological roots of anger and rage, as well as the psychological significance of violence. Allow me to cite at some length the tragic case history of Colin Ferguson, as reported by Robert McFadden in the *New York Times*:

By the end of his long descent into fury and death on the Long Island Rail Road last week, Colin Ferguson's world had been reduced to black and white, good and evil, hate and non-hate: an Orwellian realm where shades of meaning were gone and only rage made sense.

It was a world of unjust laws and universal hostility, as uncaring as form letters from a government bureau, as lonely as the rented room in Brooklyn where night after night he had read aloud from a Bible and handled a gun and brooded over what he saw as the implacable racism of America.

Like other notorious acts in a nation with legions of unstable people and 200 million firearms, the things Ferguson is accused of doing . . . —rising in a crowded car, methodically shooting strangers, killing five people and wounding 18 others—appear inexplicable on the surface. . . .³⁷

[However,] dozens of interviews with acquaintances, former teachers and employers, public officials, psychiatrists and others have produced a detailed portrait of Ferguson and suggested that the shootings were not the result of a single reverse in his life, but of a long slide of events that took him from a privileged childhood in Jamaica to rejection and failure in America.

. . . Ferguson had fallen a long way from his origins 35 years ago in Kingston, Jamaica, where the birthright of a cricket-and-private school youth was cut short by the premature death of his parents. Young, articulate, ambitious, he moved to the United States [in 1982] and aspired to the American Dream: college, marriage, jobs with a future.

But it was not to be. In California, he was remembered as brash, arrogant, disdainful of the menial jobs he could find, and critical of whites and even blacks who were not sufficiently militant. Easily offended, acquaintances said, he often twisted meanings to create racial issues where none was intended. After being robbed by two black men, they said, he began carrying a gun in a paper bag.

Later in New York, he became increasingly obsessed with what he saw as ubiquitous racism, and he lashed out angrily. It became a pattern, then a way of life. His wife divorced him in 1988 in what acquaintances called a crushing blow to a psychologically fragile man. . . .

[Black landlord Patrick] Denis, who had heard his lodger take five showers a day and chant mantras at night about “all the black people killing all the white people,” said he had feared for some time that Ferguson had become dangerously unstable, . . . had grown tired of his endless racial righteousness, . . . [and had told him to move out by the end of the month].

“All black people are discriminated against,” Denis said. . . . “But you can’t take everything in life and say it is the product of racism. He took all his failures in life and gave it a name and made it a cause.”³⁸

In what became one of the most bizarre courtroom proceedings in American history, Colin Ferguson was found competent to stand trial, and, against legal counsel, chose to act as his own defense attorney.³⁹ Clearly a highly intelligent, well-educated, and articulate man, Ferguson was allowed to cross-examine during the trial witnesses—some of whom had been wounded on the train—who testified under oath that *he*, the defendant, was indeed the person who had done the shooting. He spoke of himself as someone who had been wrongly charged, denied his guilt, and suggested that the perpetrator was not him, but, rather, some white man. Ultimately, Ferguson was found guilty on most counts, sentenced to life in prison, and reportedly, plans to appeal his case to a higher court.

Now, despite the blatant racial overtones, this was not, at bottom, a cut-and-dried case of racism. It was a case in which chronic feelings of entitlement, frustration, victimization, insignificance, alienation, anger, and rage at *life as it really is* resulted in a despicable act of hatred and retribution. Nor can we simply dismiss this incident as the irrational, aberrant behavior of some madman. For as any serious student of psychopathology soon learns, there is a fine line dividing sanity from insanity, and “normal” responses from “abnormal” ones. Both Freud and Jung discovered that the study of psychopathology provides a great deal of data as to the nature of those ordinary, day-to-day psychological processes to which we are all subject.

There is no doubt in my mind that by the time he committed his heinous acts, Colin Ferguson had been suffering for some time from a severe mental disorder, and was probably psychotic. Nonetheless, this case presents a kind of shadowy caricature reflecting the only-somewhat-more-subtle problems that so many Americans—of varying racial or ethnic backgrounds—daily face: frustration, anger, and sometimes, rage. Ferguson mirrors, in magnified and disfigured form, the American soul-sickness. What was Ferguson so furious about? Many of the same things that infuriate all of us to some degree in this disconcerting day and age! He suffered the traumatic loss of his parents at a relatively tender age, and with this, the loss of the lifestyle to which he had been accustomed. Immigrating to America—as do so many optimistic others—in search of his own success, he discovered only despair, disillusionment, and discontent. Such unexpected and painful twists of fate frequently leave people feeling victimized, frustrated, and angry about the perceived unfairness of life. We Americans in particular seem to be born with or acquire a conscious or unconscious belief that life will be fair, and that goodness will prevail. When we sooner or later learn that this is in fact not always the case, that one cannot be in complete

control of one's destiny, and that the vagaries of fate cannot be evaded by virtue, privilege, money, or even prayer, a sort of insidious anger sets in. I suspect this is part of what happened to Colin Ferguson.

Nor can Ferguson's anger be conveniently dismissed as purely pathological, narcissistic rage.⁴⁰ While it is certain that he is mentally ill, deranged, or mad, he had not always been so. In all probability, he was predisposed to psychosis prior to his arrival in this country, presumably possessing what might be diagnosed as a "narcissistic," "borderline" or perhaps "paranoid personality disorder." Nonetheless, I would argue that at least some component of his rage can be correctly understood as a normal, existential, or *ontological* part of human experience. The needlessly intimidating term "ontology" refers to the study of both the objective facts and subjective perceptions that universally comprise human existence or *being*. "Ontology," writes Rollo May, "seeks to discover the basic structures of existence—the structures which are given to everyone at every moment."⁴¹ For most present intents and purposes, the terms "ontological" and "existential" can be considered by readers to be interchangeable.

What distinguishes most of us from the Colin Fergusons of the world is the fact that—for various reasons, not the least of which is fear of the likely consequences—we do not literally, as Hamlet states it, "take arms against a sea of troubles." Yet, we are all susceptible to the "slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,"⁴² and the frustration, anger, and sometimes even rage that arise when fate deals us a "bad hand." "The concept of destiny makes the experience of anger necessary," writes May. "The kind of person who 'never gets angry' is, we may be sure, the person who also never encounters destiny."⁴³ *Destiny*, like *fate*, refers to the existential "givens" of life, those aspects of existence that are immutable, inexorable, and inevitable. Destiny differs from "predestination," however, in that destiny exists always in dialectical relationship with human *freedom*. We each have a destiny insofar as we are born into a world at a biologically determined point in time, in a particular place, to specific parents, of a certain gender, and with some unique combination of personal strengths, talents, limitations, and weaknesses. From an existential perspective, we are "thrown" into life without any choice in the matter. As we mature and develop, what we do with our innate talents, liabilities, tendencies, and sensitivities determines—at least to some significant degree—our destiny or our fate.

Fate is commonly understood as being synonymous with *destiny*. But for psychiatrist Alexander Lowen, "the two words have slightly different

meanings. Destiny is related to the word *destination*. It refers to what . . . [we become] , whereas fate describes what one is. Fish are fated to swim as birds are fated to fly, but that is hardly their destiny. . . . The oracle at Delphi did not foretell the destiny of Oedipus, which was to vanish from the earth and find an abode with the gods. He prophesied his fate, which was that he would kill his father and marry his mother."⁴⁴ Finding and fulfilling our personal destiny is one of the primary aims of any comprehensive psychotherapy. Destiny, declaims May, "*is the design of the universe speaking through the design of each one of us.*"⁴⁵

The prototypical encounter with fate or destiny, peculiar as it may seem, is the bare fact of being born, or what psychoanalyst Otto Rank referred to as "the trauma of birth."⁴⁶ Rank's existential attitude toward the inevitabilities in life, the ontological givens, our destiny, led also to his emphasis on the trauma of separation, beginning with the birth trauma, as well as the need to face death—the ultimate separation experience. Rank, while still under the sway of his mentor, Sigmund Freud, theorized that the experience of birth is a traumatic tearing away of the child from the idyllic womb into a strange, hostile environment, and that the child feels great anxiety and *resentment* toward the mother—and her genitals—for this sudden expulsion from Paradise. Despite the Freudian sexual influence, from which he finally freed himself, Rank emerged as one of the early founders of existential psychotherapy, as will later be elaborated.

Swiss analyst Carl Jung, like Rank, also recognized and commented on this archetypal anxiety and anger regarding separation from the mother and from our originally whole, unconsciously blissful condition, declaring that "a deep resentment seems to dwell in man's breast against the brutal law that once separated him from instinctive surrender to his desires and from the beautiful harmony of animal nature."⁴⁷ This "brutal law" to which Jung alludes refers first to the fact of being born, and second, to the necessity of forging an "ego" during the early process of socialization. Acknowledging the resentment we each bear since birth about having been forcefully evicted from the warm, familiar womb and subsequently rent asunder by the collective demands of civilization, Jung, at the same time, wryly critiqued Rank's theory, quipping that to call birth "traumatic" is a gross misuse of that term: Generally speaking, birth is "traumatic" in the same sense that life itself is a traumatic experience! Nevertheless, the existential fact of birth, of being banished from Eden and involuntarily "thrown" into this sometimes unwelcoming, startling, frustrating, and frightening new plane of existence, is perhaps the most primeval root of our ontological resentment, anger, and rage.