

High anxiety: air anger conquered by acting my rage

By Ruth Ostrow

BANG, boom, bang. The sound reverberates through our seats. The young man next to me looks nervous.

His hand clutches the hand-rest. "Is that turbulence?" he asks.

Feels like it. See those grey clouds. It's just the changing condition of the air. Nothing to worry about, I say returning to my book.

Shake, bang, bang, and more bangs in quick succession.

"This is my first flight in a long time, and I'm very nervous. The turbulence is making me feel really ill," he continues.

The truth is I feel nauseous myself. It feels strong, the banging, like someone in the seat behind is kicking our seats. The banging becomes increasingly rhythmic.

In fact, its banging in beat with a song that's playing on the plane headsets. I wonder if it is coming from behind.

I kneel on the seat and peer over. The woman behind glares at me.

"Anything wrong?" she asks accusingly. "I just wondered if anyone was banging my chair with their foot, accidentally of course, but it's making the two of us here feel quite airsick."

She shrugs and looks away with real attitude. I sit down again. The banging stops.

"That's better, I was really beginning to worry," says the young man next to me.

I pick up my book and start reading again. Bang, bang, bang, bang.

"Fancy that b... telling me what to do," I hear from behind me. Now it's clear that either she or one of her friends is banging their feet against the chair. By this stage I have a full-blown case of air rage.

Anger is a funny emotion. It's damned from one side of the planet to the next as a bad emotion -- destructive, negative, an emotion that leads to nothing but pain.

I'm not so sure, preferring the Harriet G. Lerner school of thought.

In her highly-acclaimed book *The Dance of Anger*, the best-selling US psychologist talks about anger being a defining emotion. It helps us see where our boundaries are being violated, and to take action to stop it.

She maintains that anger identifies problems, is a knife that cuts away relationship rot, can help us speak our truth. With fight-or-flight hormones pulsing through our blood, normally humble folk can stand up and say the things that have needed to be said.

Lerner makes the point that it's not the anger that is the problem, it's the venting of it. In short, anger is a potent emotion that needs to be expressed in appropriate, controlled ways, she says.

I am contemplating this as the banging continues. Bang, bang, bang, now metered out in spiteful doses.

The hostess wanders past, I hail her. "We are feeling really airsick. The people behind are kicking our seat. Could you do something?" I say politely.

She looks aggravated that she has to do something beyond serve and smile.

She is not helpful, tactlessly repeating my sentiments, loudly.

"We'll be extra careful," the woman behind smiles.

As the hostess walks away I hear her begin again: "Who does she think she is?" Bang, bang, bang.

I get to thinking. In my opinion there is healthy anger, and then there is unhealthy anger. Healthy anger is when boundaries have been violated.

Unhealthy anger is when we project something onto a situation that is not warranted or when we blame someone who is not to blame. Take the woman behind. I know that in her subconscious mind, I'm probably like her bossy older sister and that despite my reasonable request, I've triggered memories of being six and angry, in the car with mum and dad.

She complains on and on to her companion -- an audible tantrum.

I put my chair back in protest, hoping to squash the tray into her, punishing her for taking my dolly, punishing my younger sisters who always got away with more than I did.

It's not fair, I grizzle in my head, having my own flashback. I grab my iced water with a sudden urge to accidentally raise my hand and -- oops -- as the contents would go flying over the back of the seat and hit her on the head.

As I raise my glass, headlines flash before my eyes: Prominent Body Mind Soul journalist who preaches inner calm and peace arrested on assault charges.

I put the cup down and began doing my yogic breathing, which fills the body with more oxygen and hence calms the heart-rate. I grit my teeth and chant Ommmmmm thinking of that Seinfeld episode where the enraged characters run around screaming, "Serenity now! Serenity now!" in desperation.

I don't know what would have happened had the trip gone on much longer. The hostess's voice comes over the speaker telling us we are shortly touching down. But I do know this.

Some anger is healthy. Some anger is unhealthy and inappropriate. Some should be expressed, some is better dealt with in the therapists room. As I take a long swig of my rescued iced water, I remind myself of this: it's a lucky person who can tell the difference.

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