

Exploring the concept of Anger through a philosophical Community of Enquiry

Sue Lyle

I have prepared this enquiry plan at a time when anger is being played out with such devastating effects between Israel and Palestine, in Syria, in the Ukraine and in so many other places in the world. Our children are aware that this is going on around them and it must seem intractable. What hope can we give them of people moving away from acting out their anger towards reconciliation. I am a great believer in asking your mind to sort something out for you and this morning I woke up early and a poem wrote itself.

In thinking about the poem today, I wondered if it could be a stimulus to help children think about the concept of anger and the idea of making friends with anger that is explored in the poem. This led to the following discussion plan for a P4C enquiry. I think I would aim this at the 8-13 age range, but teachers will know best if it is suitable for their classes. If you use it I would love to know how it goes.

Discussion plan

Begin the session by reading the poem to the children. I think it would be good if they had a copy of the poem and had the chance to re-read it for themselves and have a few minutes to think about it.

Anger

Anger strikes suddenly like lightening from a storm
Anger is like a fierce sun burning in the sky
Anger like a powerful wave can knock you over
Anger fills your body like a swirling wind

Then just as quickly as it came it is gone and calm returns
But what is left in its wake?

We are wounded by its lightening strike
Drown in anger's waves
Burn under its penetrating glare
Swept up in its powerful wake

What if we could make friends with anger, talk to it, understand it, channel it?

We could laugh at the storm and welcome the refreshing rain
We could jump in the waves as they circle round our bodies
Enjoy the warm glow of the sun on our faces
Run with the wind.
If we could just make friends with anger.

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Warm up activity

Find images to go with the elements of sun, waves, lightening and wind and print out the first four lines of the poem and attach them to the pictures. I found lots of great pictures on google.

Place the annotated pictures around the room.

Ask the children to stand beside the one they think best describes the concept of anger.

Once children have made their choices ask them to talk together around the pictures and then share their thinking with the class.

This would be a good time to move into enquiry.

The enquiry

The last line of the poem wonders what might happen if we could make friends with anger. I specifically want the children to think about anger in a different way and therefore I am going to suggest we present children with a question and explain we are very interested in their ideas about this question and ask them if it could be the question we look at in our enquiry. The question I would like them to enquire into is: "Can you make friends with anger?"

To carry out this enquiry they will need to think about what kind of things friends do and how making friends with anger might open up a space to talk about the emotion and expression of anger in a philosophical way. The following are some ideas that might be helpful when preparing to facilitate this enquiry.

Before moving directly to the question it can be good to do some **clarification** of the concepts of anger and friendship. Anger is not usually judged to be a good emotion either to feel or to express (excepting righteous anger). However, we should acknowledge that there are different types of anger; anger quickly spent and forgotten is of a different quality to anger that continues over time that can lead to continuing bad relationships between people. Calling for **examples** of anger at the beginning of the session can help children make some **distinctions** between different types of anger. We can be angry with people or events or things - different kinds of anger can be identified from the examples the children share.

It may also be helpful to ask, "Who is responsible for anger?" Frequently those expressing anger blame others for causing their anger as a way of mitigating their actions. Those accused of causing anger may end up feeling guilty or

being judged as guilty by others for promoting the anger. Anger can be hard to resolve in such cases when it provokes feelings of blame and guilt. Children can explore the difficulties that occur if we try to identify **causes and effects** of anger and consider **assumptions** made and the **implications** of assigning blame and guilt in these ways.

Feelings of rage that are expressed through angry behaviour can lead to later regret when in a calmer frame of mind. Those expressing such anger are often judged to be morally unworthy as others are often hurt by the rage that is expressed. We might ask some **questions**: Is someone who acts on feelings of anger a bad person? Is anger an emotion that is out of our control? If that is the case can we be blamed for it? It is possible to control anger? Should we control anger?

It is important not to get stuck on thinking about moral judgements about whether anger is right or wrong which is my intention in posing the question, "Can you make friends with anger?" Remind the children of the question and call on them to think about what qualities we value in our friends so we can think about making friends with anger. You might like to call on children to list some of the virtues of friendship and then use their ideas to apply to the question. The following ideas came from a class of year 5 children during a different enquiry. Friends should:

- Be good listeners
- Understand you
- Care about you
- Give you advice
- Be loyal
- You can trust them
- Tell you the truth

Using their ideas we can help them apply the virtues of friendship they identify to our question. What would be involved in making friends with anger?

If a friend should be a good listener, then making friends with anger would involve listening to anger's story and trying to understand it. If a friend is someone who cares then they would offer compassion for anger, but also for those who have been hurt by anger. Rather than blaming anger for their behaviour, a friend would seek to understand it and might offer advice. Rather than making assumptions about angry feelings, a friend would ask questions to try and clarify what was going on. A friend would be loyal to anger and try to see things from anger's point of view, but would also tell the truth and honestly consider whether or not the anger was unreasonable or perhaps justified and try and separate out the feelings from the actions. A friend might help anger think about how things could be put right, about reconciliation rather than revenge.

Drawing on the children's ideas about what friendship entails the enquiry can move forward to think about the concept of anger in a novel and interesting way. Much will depend on the children's own experiences and ideas, but at a time when so much anger is being expressed in the world an enquiry that seeks to make friends with anger might help the children consider how the anger that they witness everyday in the world could be addressed.

I believe that anger cannot be dispensed with or extinguished. It must be listened to, and made friends with so the negative energy of anger can be transformed. We all experience anger, we need to understand our own anger as well as the anger of others and make friends with it and I hope this enquiry plan might help children begin that process for themselves.