

“Symbolic Victory” – Unhealthy Anger as Compensation for Weakness

in the Psychology of Abraham Low

By Ronda Chervin, Ph.D.

Professor of Philosophy, Holy Apostles College and Seminary

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Abraham Low (1891-1954), was a Polish Jewish psychiatrist who studied medicine in France and Austria. He immigrated to the United States in 1921, where he taught at the [University of Illinois](#) Medical School and directed their Neuropsychiatric Institute. He is most famous for developing a self-help program for former mental patients, but also for all those troubled by disproportionate anger, anxiety and depression, now called Recovery, International. (The name pre-dates 12 Step Recovery programs). There are groups based on Low’s concepts all over the world. Presently, Low’s system is being adapted for high school students and prison in-mates.

Perhaps you, the reader, are already wondering if Low condemned all anger, making no room for good and healthy forms of anger. Not at all. Healthy forms of anger are justified, under the control of the angry person, and never vengeful. Unhealthy forms of anger, even when the reason is to come against real injustices, are disproportionate and vengeful. More about this later in my article.

Getting back to Dr. Abraham Low’s career, he discovered over time that out-patients of his had great trouble dealing with daily life situations. Eventually he undertook what I describe as a phenomenological analysis of emotions and daily life. Low’s ground- breaking book is entitled *Mental Help Through Will Training* (Glencoe, Illinois: Willett Publishing Company, 1950)

I attended Recovery meetings that took place at Franciscan University of Steubenville in the early 1990’s. My motive was to overcome patterns of anger that dated from about 2 years old to 58

years old! Eventually I progressed from 3 fits of anger a day to one every month. After many years of practice as a participant and a leader of Recovery, International groups, I became interested in integrating Low's insights with Catholic spirituality. I wrote a book called *Taming the Lion Within: Five Steps from Anger to Peace* (Oldsmar, Florida: Simon Peter Press, 2006)

Here is an example of the type of incident of anger Low analyzed. A man, his wife, and his mother-in-law are taking a walk. Just when they return to the house, the mother-in-law says that she forgot to stick a letter into the mail box at the corner. Would her son-in-law be kind enough to walk back and mail it for her? (Later in the chapter, Low describes the mother-in-law as generally domineering.) The son-in-law grabs the letter and, in a huff, accommodates the request of his mother-in-law but then sulks over it for hours afterwards in the presence of his wife and mother-in-law, refusing to eat dinner with the family, etc. Abraham Low notes that the trivial request hardly justifies such anger. He then analyzes the way his "hero" avoided direct confrontation, but instead showed his anger in a churlish, rude manner.

Low analyzes such examples as manifesting the desire for what he calls "a symbolic victory." We all would like to be victorious in small and large battles of life. Many times we cannot win. To compensate for our feelings of weakness and inferiority when we fail, we try to obtain a symbolic victory. Take the example given above of the resentful son-in-law. A victory that might really satisfy this man would be if he could force his demanding mother-in-law to leave his house for good. Not able to convince his wife of such a plan, he feels weak and powerless. But when he shows resentment for having to help his mother-in-law in small ways, he feels powerful. He gets a symbolic victory over his wife and mother-in-law by his coldness and rejection. He has the power to hurt them with his resentment. Even though this lasts only a few hours, it is satisfying to his pride.

In the analysis of Low's concept of symbolic victory I use in my own teaching on inordinate anger, here is the way I would describe the little scenario given above. When we cannot win a real victory over a person, or a group such as the leaders of the political party we reject, we feel weak, sometimes to the point of feeling "impotent." However, when we express resentment through such manifestations as sulking, constant criticalness, ridicule, sarcasm, or yelling, we are in the dominant position for we hold others hostage to our bad mood, negative words, or screaming anger. We get a "symbolic" victory. We put down others by the cold silent treatment, or by hot expression of hostility or rage. When we are weak we are like wounded lambs, but when we express hot anger we are like lions.

Here is the way Abraham Low analyzes symbolic victory as it concerned the son-in-law described above: "Frank's mother imagined, perhaps unknown to herself, that she represented or symbolized sovereignty in her dealings with the members of her family. Her will to assert her sovereignty (by getting her son-in-law to mail the letter) provoked the resistance of her son, with the result that family life was turned into a battlefield of temperamental dispositions in which both mother and son craved the glory of symbolic victories, and both effectively frustrated one another's ludicrous ambitions. In the end, a cruel implacable deadlock developed in which feelings and sensibilities were ruthless slaughtered and fellowship was made a shambles. The realistic objects of the incessant fights were invariably such trivialities as a letter to be mailed or a sugar bowl to be filled. The symbolic goal was the craving to assert sovereign rights. The inevitable results were tears, crushed feelings and refusals to eat or otherwise to share and to practice fellowship." (*Mental Health*...pp. 59-60)

Here an equally fascinating quotation from Low: (For people who take pride in their social selves) "the occasions or real or imagined slurs, piques and affronts will be innumerable. A

contemptuous shrug on the part of the man you speak to, a quizzical raise of the eyebrow in the countenance of your neighbor...a critical intonation in the questions asked by your employer, friend, wife or brother, will be felt, on a thousand occasions, as a severe challenge to the value of your social self....A challenge of this kind is almost certain to cut you to the quick and provoke your temper..."*Peace versus Power in the Family* (p. 117-118) Hence the desire to seek symbolic victory through angry retaliation or other expressions of resentment such as cold criticism.

Here is a related image of symbolic victory I use to explain chronic inordinate anger. Angry people, like myself in the past, often deny that they are the cause of their anger problems. "I'm angry because everybody else is obnoxious," would be their analysis. Without being conscious of my previous mode of relating to life, it came down to this: I want to be the heroine of the drama of life, with everyone else as secondary characters or walk-ons. Others should say and do what will enhance my role and if they fail to do so, they become the brunt of my anger. This happens not only with people but also with machines. In a session at a Recovery, International group, one person admitted to bringing a shot gun to his office to aim at the screen of his recalcitrant computer!

A few more examples of trying to get a symbolic victory through anger will make the concept even clearer:

Paul is driving down a highway at 45 mph – the speed limit. His windows are rolled up. All of a sudden, he notices a car about to pass him at what seems like 70 mph! He slows down to avoid an accident. He considers calling 911 but then realizes that by the time the patrol car would get there the speeder would probably have exited the freeway. He decides instead to speed up in order to get along side of the offending vehicle. When he catches up, he hits the beeper, raises a finger in a vulgar gesture, and yells a stream of insults and curses through the *closed* window.

Paul's initial anger is just. Such a driver could cause the death of innocent people on the highway. He feels impotent to stop this speeder. He tries to achieve a symbolic victory through his raging curses (sending the driver to hell in his own mind). Can you see how he compensates for feelings of weakness by the pseudo-strength of his loud curses and his vulgar gesture? He is "putting down" the other. In his anger he is the superior sovereign king of the road and the other driver is the cursed wretch!

Here is how Abraham Low put it: "Is it sensible to risk your life for the pleasure of overtaking another driver...Let me tell you that what secures pleasure in such instances is something purely symbolic: when you pass a driver you score a symbolic victory over another person." (*Peace versus Power in the Family* (Glencoe, Illinois: Willett Publishing Co., 1943, p. 114)

Here's another one. Lisa is a professor of English at a Community College. The chairperson of Liberal Arts, Donna, is a very attractive woman, also the daughter of the Dean. Donna is known to be biased, inefficient, and often away for "conferences." Lisa is a hard working teacher. She is slightly envious of Donna but also justly angry at Donna's behavior. She would like to complain to the Dean but fears that Donna would find a way to fire her if she, Lisa, ever reported anything to the Dean, since the Dean is Donna's father. Lisa compensates for her feelings of frustration and weakness by keeping up a running commentary on everything Donna does wrong. These incidents she shares daily with her group of cronies over lunch. Lisa does not consider herself to be an angry person because everything she says that is negative is true.

Can you see how she is compensating for her feelings of weakness by having the upper hand as the astute critique of her deficient boss?

Before presenting you with Dr. Low's ingenious remedies for approaching life with symbolic victories, I will suggest to you that wider social anger issues exhibit a similar pattern. I am thinking of

the Intifada in Israel. Little and teen-age boys having taken in the rage of their elders over life in the Palestinian camps, took to throwing stones at Jewish passers-by. For the purposes of this article I will not analyze the issue of justice, because I want to concentrate instead on the mechanism of the weak compensating for inability to achieve a real victory, sovereignty, by acts of violence. The stone-thrower feels powerful even though his actions could not reverse a wider political situation.

Or, closer to home, consider ridiculing cartoons in magazines and on You-Tubes concerning political opponents. I am thinking of one exaggerating the image of the rear end of President Obama's wife who was wearing a tight short skirt in public. The person forwarding such cartoons rightly grieves the pro-abortion stance of Obama and his wife. Even though he or she engages in every political move possible to overthrow pro-abortion legislation including picketing and praying in front of abortion mills, there has been no large scale victory yet over abortion. So the protester feels weak. But he or she compensates for that weakness in the symbolic victory of ridicule. The mocker stands over the mocked and laughs.

Of course, Dr. Low, was not content merely to describe this subtle mechanism of symbolic victory. In his lectures to his groups he provided an equally fascinating set of remedies, easy to remember because encapsulated in "tools" similar to the kind found in 12 Step. Concerning anger, his funniest is "Expect frustrations every 5 minutes, you won't be disappointed."

Here is the analysis. If you start the day thinking "Oh, what a beautiful morning, oh, what a beautiful day...everything's going my way," you are bound to feel angry all day long since daily life is full of irritating set-backs. But if you psyche yourself up to expect frustrations, then you are delighted when anything goes smoothly.

Of course, just muttering such a slogan can't work by itself. It requires years of attending groups to habituate oneself to healthy underlying attitudes. Take another one: seek averageness instead of

exceptionality. (see Mental Health...pp. 80-90) One of the hardest of the concepts to grasp is the value of averageness. Most of us are trained from early childhood to "do your best." We think of average as mediocre. To be exceptional is highly prized. Shockingly at first, Low insists that the only happy people are not idealists or romantics, but realists. People who Low labels as "romantic-intellectuals" always project ideal possibilities in all spheres of life. Then we feel miserable because we cannot attain what is desired. By contrast, realists, understand that surrounded by millions of people full of faults, mistakes, and even sins, it is extremely unlikely that anything short of heaven will come out perfectly. Expecting an average amount of frustrations and set-backs each day, the realist works around them to attain the most loving possibilities within that average framework.

Let's just take these 2 remedies and apply them to the examples given above of anger in everyday life. Frank should accept that life with his mother-in-law in the home, is going to be full of frustrations. He should realize that this is average for all extended families living together. Instead of being angry all the time, he needs to work realistically around the average. For example, if he doesn't want his mother-in-law asking favors all the time to assert her dominance, he should plan for times to be alone with his wife outside the house.

Given the averageness of speeding on the highways, Paul should either take a longer route or, expecting these frustrations, immediately leave the lane of speeding cars and distract himself with his favorite news or music station. Lisa has a choice. She could decide that Donna is so unbearable it is better to seek a new job, or, she can decide that if this is Donna's average she has to just work around it, but stop illustrating another maxim of Low: "talking it up is working it up."

Youth living in unjust conditions can be banded together for good activities and for training in non-violent political activities vs. encouraged to throw rocks.

Instead of wasting time drawing ridiculing cartoons or looking at them, we can work even harder at pro-life activities.

Since such realistic alternatives to anger exist, why wouldn't every over-angry person make those choices? Here is where our original concept of symbolic victory comes in again. We enjoy being angry. How so? According to Dr. Low, daily life is mostly boring. Angry people like melo-drama to spice up the day. Flying into a rage, or indulging in witty ridicule, or criticizing a "demonized" boss is a lot more enjoyable than simply getting through the chores of the day! It brings us the "joys" of feeling superior through symbolic victory.

Is that the grim alternative? Perpetual anger or boredom? No. According to Low the realistic alternative is doing little deeds of love. That is what brings as much happiness as we can have in a world such as we live in.

Of course, from a Christian standpoint, as a result of the effects of original sin, we would expect the average or worse in daily life vs. perfection. We should expect the fulfillment of all ideals as the reward of the repentant in heaven.

Intrigued? To get a full list of these efficacious tools you could go to Search and read the Recovery International web-site. There you will also find where there are free groups all over the world and even phone and e-mail groups. Incidentally, the group meetings are full of laughter. As in, hearing that someone was thinking of shooting the computer, makes others of us laugh!

A concept somewhat similar to symbolic victory can be found in the writings of the great Catholic philosopher and spiritual writer, Dietrich Von Hildebrand. In his analysis of types of pride, Von Hildebrand describes the self-righteously proud person as loving to sit on the throne of truth to

hurl denunciations at others! (See *Transformation in Christ (Manchester, N.H.: Sophia Institute Press, 1990, pp. 299-313)*)

An immediate clarification: by self-righteous anger Von Hildebrand did not mean the righteous anger we ought to feel and often express against error and evil. The prophets certainly had that kind of anger as did John the Baptist. Jesus was sometimes angry in a righteous way: “(Jesus) looked around at them with anger...” (Mark 3:5) The most well-known example is His driving the money changers from the temple. (Mark 11:15-17)

The right kind of anger of righteous persons comes from being “inflamed with the desire of preventing an injustice or ensuring the victory of the good.” (*Transformation, p. 304*) Such anger is willed by God as a step in combating error and evil.

However, as Von Hildebrand shows so masterfully in his treatment of the self-righteous zealot the sin of self-righteous pride consists not in hating error and sin, but in wanting to sit on the throne of truth as if was one’s own possession, to judge others from this lofty perch, with merciless harshness, in a hard and rigid attitude.

For instance, the time some of us spend refining our judgments of those in the wrong is much greater than any time spent in praying for them. Rightfully indignant at error and sins of others I have sometimes failed to see how corroded with hate my efforts at reforming them have become. Kierkegaard liked to say that sins of others should be a reason to weep rather than to gossip.

Now here is where the concepts of Low and Von Hildebrand meet. Pharisaic persons gloats over the moral failures of others to confirm their own moral superiority.

Describing the wrong kind of zeal, Von Hildebrand also wrote that it is “not anointed with the holy oil of patience...that it is apt to degenerate into an angry zealotry devoid of all kindness and

trustfulness, and to dash forward with an impetuous fury stemming entirely from the natural man...his entire robust power is put into the service of God; but the aspect of dying unto one's self is absent...very different in character is the gentle, radiant, peaceful flame, the wholly spiritualized ardor that burns in him rich in patience and loving kindness, who may say of himself, 'I live, not I: but Christ liveth in me.' (*Transformation in Christ*, p. 309-311)

So, the finest remedy for proudly seeking symbolic victory is simply the Gospel!

As I conclude this short article my great wish is that those of you who found it insightful will consider looking into Recovery, International, if not for yourself, for others plagued with unhealthy anger.

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